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**KHEM LATA WAKHLU
O N WAKHLU**

KIDNAPPED

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15 UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

**45 DAYS
WITH
MILITANTS
IN KASHMIR**

KIDNAPPED

45 Days with Militants in Kashmir

The book describes in graphic detail the ordeal of the couple held captive by the Kashmir militants for 45 days. It was their faith in God and the essential goodness of man that sustained them through the despair and anguish of their captivity till they were rescued by the Army.

This traumatic experience was also unique in the sense it gave the authors an insight into the tormented minds of their captors. They wept together with villagers over the prevailing turmoil in the State and had dialogues with youth from several militant organisations on many subjects.

The result is an absorbing account of the interplay of fear, anxiety and hurt feelings that have come to colour the psyche of the people. The disruption of studies and unemployment are two factors behind the growing frustration of the youth. This frightening drama of their lives has, however, reinforced the Wakhlu's faith in love, compassion and concern values which are still deeply ingrained in the ethos of the people of Kashmir.

KHEM LATA WAKHLU, former Minister of Tourism, Jammu and Kashmir was abducted along with her husband on September 4, 1991 by extremists in Kashmir. They were rescued after 45 days of captivity with Hizbullah militants on October 18 by the Indian Army.

She has been active in politics since 1972. She played an important role in the revival of the National Conference in Jammu & Kashmir before and after the Sheikh-Indira Accord in 1975. She was a Member of the Jammu & Kashmir Legislative Assembly and became Cabinet Minister for Tourism and Estates in July 1984. She was active in the formation of the J & K Janata Dal of which she is presently General Secretary.

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Dr. Wakhlu is a Member of the Authors Guild of India. He has authored many books and published a number of papers.

By the same authors:

KASHMIR: BEHIND THE WHITE CURTAIN

KIDNAPPED

45 Days with Militants in Kashmir

KHEM LATA ~~WAKHLU~~
O.N. WAKHLU



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*To our children
Arun, Bharat, Anu and Savita.
They braved the days with courage, positivity
and utmost faith.*

Preface

THIS book narrates the events that occurred from the day we were kidnapped by the militants in Kashmir upto the time we were rescued by the army. These forty five days have been the most agonizing in our lives. Every day weighed heavily on our hearts. However, our faith in God and our incessant prayers gave us strength to face the ordeal.

Our experience during this period was traumatic but also unique in many ways. Sometimes we were gripped by acute fear. At other times, love poured out of our hearts when our captors got ill or wounded in accidents. We shed tears and wept together with many people who were sad about the prevailing turmoil. We talked to many people in the villages. We also had dialogues with youth from several militant organisations on many subjects. We have written about these interactions.

We saw fear, anxiety, and hurt feelings tormenting the people. Education has suffered a grievous blow. Many bright youth are sad and frustrated.

While going through this frightening drama of our lives, the interactions that we have had, have reinforced our faith in love, compassion and concern, which values, we found still deeply ingrained in the ethos of the people of Kashmir.

Those who followed our travail from outside suffered deep trauma too. Our children, Arun and Bharat have written about their experience and what they learnt from it while seeking to free us from captivity.

We owe a deep debt of gratitude to many people whose prayers and good wishes made a tremendous contribution to our well-being. We are deeply touched by their love. Surrender and

Vimla showed extraordinary courage and fortitude under trying circumstances. We are proud of them.

S. Venkataraman of PLS processed the manuscript in good time. We are grateful to him. V.C. Jain and K.P.R. Nair of Konark Publishers have taken pains to see this book through the press. We are thankful.

KHEM LATA WAKHLU
O.N. WAKHLU

Pune

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>vii</i>
1. THUNDERBOLT	1
2. FEAR AND AGONY	11
3. FUGITIVES	23
4. STORM IN THE WULAR LAKE	38
5. HEART OF THE MATTER	54
6. LOVE	67
7. CHESSMEN MURDERED	81
8. CONTRADICTION	105
9. DOUBLE STANDARDS	122
10. WHEN IS NAVARATRA?	140
11. UGP	159
12. DISENCHANTMENT	178
13. GUDDI OR GODDESS?	192
14. ALLAH-O-AKBAR	206
15. WHAT I LEARNT FROM THE ABDUCTION CRISIS — <i>Arun Wakhlu</i>	220
16. WHAT I LEARNT FROM THE ABDUCTION OF MY PARENTS — <i>Bharat Wakhlu</i>	227
GLOSSARY	232

Chapter 1

Thunderbolt

IN the lap of Shankracharya hill, by the side of the Dal Lake lies the area called Buchwara in the city of Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir. Situated in this mohalla is the ancestral home of the Wakhlu family. At one time the premises were bubbling with human activity and its accompanying hustle and bustle. However, due to the turbulence in the valley, all this suddenly changed. The times were trying and difficult. People were agonized due to all sorts of pressures and inconvenience. We, namely, Mrs. Khem Lata Wakhlu (Kshema) and her husband Dr. O.N. Wakhlu (Omkar) had gone out during the winter of 1991 for our usual sojourn to meet our children. When we returned to the valley we stayed with our relation Dr. S.N. Dhar and his wife Dr. Vimla, where Khem Lata also looked after her ailing mother. As if her mother's illness was not enough, her sister-in-law, Vimlaji (affectionately called Billieji), was also taken ill for quite some time. We provided company to the family and generally looked after the patients, while we were otherwise confined to the four walls of the house in view of the tense situation in the valley.

In the last week of August 1991, we moved to our house at Buchwara. Being aware of the fact that the house was well guarded by a contingent of Jammu and Kashmir Armed Police, provided by the Government, we were free from anxiety and did not expect any unwelcome mishap within the premises.

Mrs. Wakhlu had been for a long time associated with the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference as a prominent political worker. She was a Member and Secretary of the Provincial Executive Committee of the Party. Later she was a Member of the J & K State Legislative Assembly had held the office of Minister

for Tourism and Trade Agencies in the G.M. Shah ministry. Dr. Wakhlu, an engineer and academician, was the Principal of the Regional Engineering College, Srinagar for a long time. They were well-known citizens of the State.

September in Kashmir is the most memorable time of the year, the weather is salubrious and the gardens are at their loveliest. The sun is warm and shines forth through a spotless blue sky. On the 4th day of this month we woke up early in the morning and took a stroll in the garden. The soothing dew drops on the lush green grass touched our feet and we marvelled at the bounties of nature. As the sun rose slowly behind the Shankracharya hill, its rays were beaming their golden hues which glistened on the large window panes of the house producing a mystical aura around it. It was a breathtaking sight.

While strolling in the garden Khem Lata's eyes suddenly fell on the ancestral house and the lawns. Her heart was enveloped by pain and anguish, when she remembered those days and incidents which had caused severe damage to the property through attacks of arson and bomb blasts by extremists in the previous years. The premises looked ghastly and like a haunted house. The garden, which was once the pride of the locality, was now dissolved and in total disarray. She looked at the rosary and felt as if the plants were weeping over their fate. She touched the roses and felt that the thorns were pricking not only her fingers, but her heart too.

Later, that day, one of our dear friend's son, Matin Wain, dropped in to talk about some private work. After we discussed some mundane matters, Matin said:

"Please, uncle don't move out from your house. I'll do all the outside errands for you. Don't worry at all."

"Yes, we are aware of the situation. Indeed, we haven't moved out for months. We have been confined to our home all the time", Dr. Wakhlu informed him.

"Is it really that bad?" asked Khem Lata.

Matin got up from his chair, touched her feet and said: "No, aunty, for God's sake, you'll not move out of these premises. Never at all." Matin then took hold of her hand and put it over his head and forcefully pleaded again: "Please, swear, and promise me that you'll not venture out of these premises."

"Why are you so anxious? We'll take care. And besides we have the armed sentries to guard us. There should be no worry", Khem Lata told him.

Matin was satisfied and he bade us goodbye.

We reflected over what had transpired and were pained and sad about the situation in the city. In the afternoon another friend of ours called on us. Mohd. Shafi reinforced what Matin had told us earlier. While he was taking leave to go, Dr. Wakhlu told Shafi to trust Dastagir Sahib and not to worry unnecessarily. "Allah protects us all", he told Shafi while he left the premises.

Dusk was now approaching and we picked up our spectacles, books and newspapers from the table in the garden, where we have had tea with our guest a few moments earlier. Khem Lata went straight to the bathroom to have a wash. Omkar got down to attend to some work in the living room. Suddenly he was alarmed when he heard some noise and a loud bang on the main gate of the premises. The noise persisted for a short while as he heard the loud shouts of some hoodlums who were apparently arguing with the police guards. He apprehended mischief and in a jiffy he bolted the main door. Then he rushed to inform Kshema.

We locked ourselves inside the bathroom after locking the bedroom door as well. The noise grew louder and the hoodlums were roaming around in the ancestral house searching for us in each and every room, banging, breaking and pushing every door and everything that came in their way. They caught hold of our servant, beat him, and at gun point asked him to divulge our whereabouts. Inside the bathroom, we were trembling with fear gripping each other's hands in hushed silence. Our faces were

ashen and death like palour was visible on them. We were trying our best not even to breath lest we be found out by the armed hoodlums and massacred.

In these agonizing moments, Kshema was listening to her own throbbing heartbeats which intensified her fright because she apprehended that the noise of the heartbeats will divulge where we were hiding. Omkar was mumbling some prayers with dazed eyes protruding blankly.

The noise outside grew louder as the terrorists were approaching our house. They broke open the first door with a loud bang. Then they ransacked the house smashing into smithereens every article: window panes, TV set, doors, locks, ceilings, wall clock, almost everything that they cast their eyes on, with their guns, their kicks and fisticuffs. They were shouting out loud to our servants: 'Where's Madam? We'll kill you. Show us where they are hiding. Come on!' We could hear them coming nearer. Meanwhile, we also heard the agonizing cries of our servant who was pleading loudly to us.

"What've I done? Please save me. They will kill me. Where're you, please?" As he said so, there was a loud bang, the bedroom door was broken, and the terrorists were now breaking open the bathroom door. They banged, banged, and banged hard for quite some time. The terrorists were desperate. They were about to blast the whole house with a hand grenade which they were carrying. Hearing their conversation already about the grenade, and with a big hole already cut into the door stunned Kshema, like a robot, opened the bathroom latch.

"Hands up!" the terrorists shouted as they pointed their guns towards us. Without looking into their eyes we raised our hands and said: "What've we done? What've done?"

"Get going! Run out! No talk", the militants shouted back.

As we walked out of our house we found police people standing in a row in the garden outside. They were helplessly

watching the spectacle. We noticed that there were some strangers standing with the policemen whom we had never seen before.

We were pushed into a three wheeler which was already parked outside the main gate. Armed terrorists kept hanging around in the three wheeler surrounding us. As the vehicle moved through the street, men, women and children had come out of their houses. Seeing this crowd, the gun-men fired a few shots into the air to scare them away and exhibit their bravado. The vehicles were driven upto the Government Chest Hospital located nearby. An ambulance was standing in the hospital compound. The militants ordered us to get into the ambulance quickly.

“Don’t you make any move”, the militants shouted at us as we got into the vehicle. We tried to look at the people nearby who were watching the situation as mute spectators.

It seemed that the whole operation was preplanned although the driver of the ambulance and another person appeared hesitant to obey the dictates of the militants. Nervously, the militants threatened them to drive away quickly without wasting any more time because each moment enhanced their risk. And the driver succumbed and moved on.

For some reason the vehicle was ordered to take a devious route via the shrine of Said Sahib near Burn Hall School. Not knowing what was in the offing, and rather dazed, Omkar bent down in front of the shrine silently chanting prayers.

The vehicle raced through the busy main street of Srinagar and landed us in the crowded Maisuma Bazar. We were ordered out and moved separately and innocuously into the interior of the locality through a maze of lanes and byelanes. It was already getting dark when the militants took us to a small neat and clean house.

Omkar was ordered by the militants to change his clothes and suddenly Kshema woke up from her stupor and the realization dawned on her that they were helpless hostages of the militants.

She looked at Omkar, his face sullen and pale, his white hair dishevelled, and she had a feeling of acute pain, as if caused by an arrow piercing her heart.

After Omkar changed his clothes, we were both offered tea by the hosts. At that moment, the tea tasted bitter like poison and we were not able to wash it down our gullets.

"Be relaxed. Have your tea, Madam. Why are you afraid? You shouldn't be panicky" said the host, who was working on a pile of papers, and had lifted his head to address us.

"We are okay", said Omkar who gave a nasty look towards the militants who were keeping guard while carrying their weapons and ammunition with them in the same room. When Kshema went for the toilet, the hostess accompanied her, and in hushed tones said: "You'll forgive us. We're not part of this gory mess. But we can't refuse these people either. Do you understand what I mean?"

At that time Kshema didn't trust her because the hostess's two daughters were otherwise relaxed and carrying out their chores normally. After dinner was served to us and the militants, we were removed to another place nearby which was a dingy, dirty house in shambles. The entrance to the house was through a narrow hole of a door in the abysmally dark passage behind the kitchen. Going through these tunnels was an agonizing experience for us and we felt as if we were surrounded by "rakhshas" (demons).

A child was already sleeping in the room to which we were taken. The householder, an elderly bespectacled man, removed the child and later made the beds for us and the militants. The room was small and smelling dirty and so was the bedding. Two militants guarding us also slept with their weapons in the same room. A few others were keeping vigil in another room of the house. At one point, when we were left alone in the room, the householder came and sat beside us pretending to be very sad and

sullen. "May I help you in some way? The CRPF picket is nearby. I wonder how I can help you. I wish I could." While saying so he put his finger under his teeth and shook his head in a pathetic way, proclaiming his helplessness.

"You needn't worry", Omkar whispered to him.

"No, No, I really want to help you. But I don't want to get killed by these devils either", he said in a hushed voice.

"Don't bother. Allah will take care of us", Omkar replied quietly.

Our stay in this place was a frightening nightmare. We didn't get a wink of sleep for the whole night. Early in the morning there was 'Azan' in a nearby mosque. 'Allah-o-Akbar' (God is great). Kshema heard these words and wept:

"Oh God, why have you landed us into this mess? Why have you failed us? What have we done to deserve this kind of treatment? Haven't we had enough of this over the last few years? Everybody calls you great and Almighty. By what name shall I call you?", Kshema's chain of thoughts was suddenly broken when one of the militants ordered us to hurry up and get ready to move to another place.

While moving to yet another place through the backdoors of many homes, a labyrinth of narrow lanes, there stood an elderly, fat and very fair matron of a household. She looked good natured. While moving through her home she involuntarily hugged Kshema very tenderly. Instantly both shed tears, while the motherly woman said: "God will take care of you, my dear." Witnessing this scene, the militants shouted: "Hurry up! It's getting late." We were taken to a nearby dingy house where Kshema was provided with a black veil and Omkar asked to wear a 'kurakul' cap. The cap and veil were taken for the askance from their owners. Thereupon, we entered yet another house where we were served tea and biscuits.

Two taxis had, in the meantime, been arranged by the

militants, as we discovered when we were asked to move out into the street in our new disguise. On seeing us with the armed militants, the taxi drivers became hesitant and nervous, and were refusing to carry them with arms. However, under threats they were left with no choice but to carry us all as directed. We were made to board separately in the two taxis and, accompanied by armed militants, taken through the main streets of Lal Chowk and Batamaloo area to a place in Chattabal on the outskirts of Srinagar city. Before we landed into the house where we stayed for the day, we had to walk quite a distance through the narrow lanes of the mohalla. People on the way did notice us in these strange circumstances but we felt that they turned their heads away pretending as if they did not see anything unusual.

The house where we stayed was newly built and neatly furnished in Kashmiri style. We were seated in a large hall. All the windows of the room were closed by the militants, and we were ordered to stay put here comfortably. Immediately we were served tea and biscuits. Thereafter Kshema was provided with a pair of new 'shalwar' and 'kameez' to wear and was ordered to have a bath and change into the new dress. While she was going to the bathroom through the kitchen of the house, a young lady was cooking meals. Her face was sullen and she gave an unwelcome look to Kshema. Although they didn't speak anything to each other, Kshema perceived that the lady was peeved because she had to cook elaborate meals for unwanted, unwelcome and uninvited guests. She was banging her pots and pans in the kitchen to give vent to her obvious annoyance.

A number of militants of various hues, sporting all kinds of beards, were keeping guard in our room by turns. The atmosphere was tense and fearful. We suffered from acute nausea and claustrophobia. Because of the presence of the armed militants we could not even talk to each other. Our glances met occasionally, however, and these would convey our deep hurt,

fear, helplessness and pain caused by the prevailing circumstances. We were sighing profusely in order to unburden our hearts. A bleak and dark future stared us in the face. The first impression about our captors was that they were ruthless, inhuman, savage, barbaric and above all terribly dull. What a poor fate it was to be with these people?

This terrible condition was somewhat broken when, in the afternoon, two persons of the Hizbullah organisation called on us. One of them sported a beard, wore dark glasses, and was of lean and thin stature. He looked like a typical *maulvi*. But the other person, who was clean-shaven and wore jeans and jacket, was quite smart and good looking. Many days later we came to know that these gentlemen were the top brass of the organization. The *maulvi* was full of hatred against India, and the paramilitary forces. He uttered some hateful words while pointing out some instances of the atrocities committed by them. On the contrary, we heaved a sigh of relief, when the other person was polite and showed very good manners. He reminded us of our younger son whom he resembled quite a lot. His good nature endeared him to us. "Please feel comfortable. Whatever you need, do please let us know, so that we could provide you with essential things." While he uttered these words we felt a strange closeness towards him. He spoke in fluent English by which we guessed that he was educated. Later, they bought us a packet full of daily toilet needs etc. As soon as Kshema noticed the large tube of tooth paste her heart missed a beat.

"This ordeal seems to be a long term programme" she thought ruefully.

"We've to get ready for moving to another place. Please wear your veil so that you're not recognized by anyone on the road. Omkar already looks like a *maulvi*."

And from that moment onwards began our long and traumatic journey. We walked, crossed the Jhelum by boat, and

moved across streets on the pillion seats of two scooters driven by armed militants. It was a pathetic scene to watch Kshema arranging her veil with one hand and holding on to the seat with the other, while the minds were full of fear.

It was already late in the night when we dismounted in a village far away from the Srinagar city.

CHAPTER 2

Fear and Agony

THE first one week was really a testing time for us. We were unable to think about ourselves. We were dazed, shocked, and in complete stupor. It seemed as if our brains had stopped working normally. Kshema was gripped with one single thought: how to kill these militants? She was full of anger, hatred and scorn for these fellows. They seemed like monsters and beasts to her. Their bushy beards were unbearable which made them look like cannibals. During this period she was plotting in her mind as to which of the weapons will be effective in killing them simultaneously. AK- 47 will kill only one person at a time? What about using the hand grenade which will perhaps blast them all together? L.M.G. would be better to kill them all. She was engrossed in these thoughts day in and day out. But the greatest problem was how to use these weapons? She had never seen them before in her life, leave apart using them? These thoughts were prying upon her mind and she was looking for a chance to get hold of one of the weapons and do her job.

Then all of a sudden, one day, during the night Kshema woke up and went out to ease herself. When she came back she couldn't get any sleep, no matter how hard she tried. Thereupon she meditated and felt a little peace after so many days. The more she kept up with it, the more peaceful she felt. When she opened her eyes they fell straight on the faces of the young militants sleeping by her side in the same room. For the first time she looked at these young people as if she had never seen them before. They were so young, tender, and in their sleep looked so innocent and helpless. Her heart was gripped with pain which caused a deep sting in her chest. The more she looked at them, the greater was

the intensity of her concern. She saw one of the boys tossing and turning in his bed and murmuring in his sleep 'Mojoi! Mojoi! (Oh mother! Oh mother!).' Most probably he was dreaming. The voice pierced through her heart like an arrow and she felt tremendous compassion and pity towards them, and developed much motherly feeling for them. At this juncture she was praying to God not for ourselves but for these young boys.

"Oh God! Why have you dragged them into this mess? What have they done to deserve this kind of fate? Is this their age to die?" She was sighing deeply and sobbing while she prayed. After a while, she felt a little relieved realizing that these people were not demons after all but human beings of flesh and blood. Thereafter she slept peacefully.

Next morning the world seemed to have changed for Kshema. She woke up to see the militants profusely smoking cigarettes which they had been doing all these days. Today she scolded them for their chain smoking and ordered them instead to roll up their beds and help the householders by doing small chores.

Kidnapping is a traumatic experience for those who are held hostages as well as their kith and kin who are ignorant of the fate of the hostages. We did not know what was going on, as we were cut off from the whole world and had no clue whatsoever. Our kidnappers on the other hand were gloating over the catch in their hands and we could feel and see that they were proud of their heroic deed.

As we settled down in the village house, tea and dinner was served to us according to the daily routine of the families. During the 45 days of our captivity we lived in over fiftyseven homes in different locations in the valley. The routine was practically the same everywhere. Hot 'sheer chai' (salted tea) from a Samavar was served with 'Girda', 'lawas' or home-made leavened bread in the morning. Lunch comprising rice and curry was served at

around one p.m. There was more 'sheer chai' in the afternoon and dinner of rice and curry again late in the evening.

It was harvest time in Kashmir and the village folk were quite busy. Usually they left home early for their errands. The house was left in charge of the militants and one person from the host family would attend to our needs. Apples, walnuts and roasted corn were occasionally given to us in many places.

While changing from one hideout to another, sometimes even during the day, we passed through the golden paddy fields which were ripe for harvesting. We ran across apple orchards with trees laden with red, fresh and juicy apples of all varieties. These sites would delight our hearts and we would feel that the trees were inviting us to have a bite of the fruit. At the same time, deep inside our hearts, we felt a tremendous sadness and remorse over what was going on in the valley. Every nook and corner, the mountains, rivers, streams, the lovely blue sky, and the golden fields were in full bloom and beautiful. People were working in the fields, orchards, and everywhere else. But, still something essential was missing. Joy and verve were there no more. An eerie silence prevailed and fear had gripped each and every heart.

One day we reached our destination when it was time for evening prayers. As we sat down in a room furnished with grass mats, in a newly built house, Nissar and the other militants went out by turns for their ablutions. Then they offered 'Namaz' together keeping their guns in front of them over the Namaz mat. Soon after our hosts laid a mattress and cushions for both of us to sit on. We were provided this pattern of squatting almost everywhere, with the difference that in a few places the furnishing and the bedding were neat and clean. One could always make out the standard of living of the hosts by the quality of bedding provided.

After 'Namaz' was over we were served meals. The militants used to eat together in fours from a 'Trami' (large copper

plate). For us meals were served in two separate plates or bowls. After each meal they would lift their hands up in prayer and bless their Islamic brotherhood and say: "Fateh Din; Fateh Mujahideen; Fateh Palestine; Fateh Afghanistan; Fateh Kashmir."

We would also raise our hands up in prayer and would say: "Fateh Love; Fateh Compassion; Fateh brotherhood of mankind." The militants would give us a mischievous look on hearing these words but didn't object to our saying so.

Nissar was a well built young man in his twenties. He was of medium height, and wore check shirts and jeans. He often recited verses from the holy Quran which he knew by heart. He would question each and every action of his in the light of the dictates of the Hadith (Hadees). He was good natured, possessed a sensitive mind and showed poetic talents. He recited a couple of his own poems in which he depicted the holy war, role of mujahideen, and the martyrdom of one of his young militant colleagues. Nissar had a good sense of humour which was evident from some of the anecdotes he narrated to us over the first twentyeight days he spent with us.

We praised him for his talents. We also asked him why he had abandoned his studies and why he had gone to Pakistan a number of times for receiving training in arms.

We came to know more about Nissar in the course of his stay with us. The thawing in the attitudes had taken place when during the first few days of our captivity he gave a ride on the pillion of his scooter to one of us. We were carried over narrow, winding zig-zag paths going through dense willow forests. The journey was made in the dark most of the time and it needed considerable driving skill to negotiate the curves particularly when the driver was laced with a gun and pouchful of ammunition.

"Are you feeling comfortable?" Nissar asked Kshema.

"You drive very smoothly on these narrow and difficult

paths", Kshema told Nissar while she was seated behind him on the scooter.

"Do you think I can drive only scooters? I've learnt how to fly an aeroplane. Besides, we were planning to hijack a plane", Nissar said with bravado.

"Hijack a plane!" asked Kshema somewhat surprised. After a pause she added: "Why didn't you do it then?"

"Because, Pakistan doesn't allow us to land the aeroplane on their soil."

"Where did you learn flying?"

"In Pakistan."

"But this is not fair. When they train you for such acts, why don't they allow you to land the plane? You're so brave. I had hardly ever thought about that", Kshema added rather encouragingly.

As they talked, the scooter came to a sudden halt at a remote village where we had to spend the night.

We spent the night with a family where we found an elderly person sleeping in the open yard outside the house. We were lodged in a room where an electric bulb was lighted. But it was so dim that it appeared dimmer than a single candle light. It was difficult even to see clearly the faces of the householders. They spread beddings on the grass matted floor, for two of us as well as for the six militants who were guarding us in the same room. As the nightfall began, we realized that two armed militants would, by turns, keep guard of the area outside the house. We also marked that the leader of the group called "Ameer" was not required to guard the area outside.

As we woke up in the morning, we found that the entire household was hovering around us; making tea; warming hot water for our needs; showing us the place where we could ease ourselves; and generally obeying all the orders and dictates of the militants without a demur. It was obvious that the militants were

behaving like overlords and the householders were doing their best to keep them in good humour.

During the day a young man who was quite inquisitive and alert suddenly bumped into the room where we were kept. Militants were guarding us as usual. Seeing the stranger in the room all the militants were unnerved. Before they could ask him anything he began to offer his clarification by introducing himself as a sympathiser of a sister militant organisation. He also informed them that he was an employee of the government. While he was talking to the militants, one of them became highly suspicious and went to the kitchen where he enquired more about the antecedents of this person. He returned with a relaxed look giving the impression that he was satisfied by the householder's explanation. Meanwhile, the stranger was glancing menacingly towards both of us and the militants, their weapons and the surroundings. He gave the impression that he knew more than what we thought he did. In our heart of hearts, however, we were praying to God that he should be an informer so that our rescuers might know about our whereabouts.

Late in the evening we were preparing to leave the house for another hideout and were fully dressed in our borrowed veil and maulvi dress. We observed and heard that the lady of the house was pleading and reassuring the militants about the stranger. "He's my sister's son. I'm certain that he'll not divulge anything about you."

"You should remember that if we hear about his having leaked any information, he along with his whole family, and all of you would live no more", they threatened. We could see the lady's ashen face while she listened to these threats coolly.

Throughout the day the elderly person in the house sat in the open sun tending and talking to the ducks and chicken. He muttered an occasional prayer and loudly spoke praises of God. The family thought him to be out of his mind, but we believed

otherwise. He was a saintly person who was naturally out of tune with the militant activity going on around him. All the same he suspected something fishy about our stay during the night. Around tea time in the afternoon, he entered our room and straightaway moved towards us, and gave each one of us a walnut which he took out from his pocket. He blessed us with kind words spoken in Kashmiri. Gratefully, we accepted the walnuts, and he left the room never to be seen by us again.

From here we moved a hell of a lot, partly on foot, partly on the pillion seat of scooters. We were separated into two groups which followed each other after some interval. At this juncture we were terribly jittery and worried by the thought that the militants have probably separated us and we were not sure when and where we would meet again. All the time, however, we believed them that this arrangement was necessary for facilitating their movements without arousing any suspicion.

To reach our destination we had to cross by boat a *nallah* (drain) and a marsh. While one group had crossed over into a hideout, situated over an island, another group had been left far behind. Nissar had settled one group in the hideout and then went back to pick up Kshema on his scooter and bring her upto the spot of boat crossing. It was pitch dark when they finally reached this place. In order to row the boat himself Nissar needed an oar, which he went to fetch from a nearby village. During this time Kshema was left alone at the bank of the marsh. Wrapped in a veil, she wanted to run away, but the thought of Omkar didn't allow her to undertake this risky act because that would have jeopardized the safety of both of them. Meanwhile, the silence was broken by the presence of a few boatmen at the site, moving their oars and talking in whispers. Kshema had a terrible fright lest these people may be from another militant group who would kidnap her.

"Who's there", queried one boatman. Kshema did not reply.

"There's nobody around. Why are you panicky?", said the other boatman.

"Of course, there's someone. Who's there? Why don't you reply?"

At this point, terrified with fear Kshema said: "It's me. I'm waiting for a person; he'll be back any moment now."

"Of course, she's the one! We wonder what's happened to them", clarified the boatman knowingly.

Meanwhile Nissar returned with an oar in hand and he alongwith Kshema landed at the destination soon after. It was a great relief for us to see each other, together again at the same place.

The house was partly surrounded by a marsh. On one side a *nallah* was flowing. The owner of the house was a fisherman which was evident from a number of nets spread out to dry in the courtyard. Situated far away from the village cluster, this house was isolated, dingy, dark and unhygienic. The place was swarming with mosquitoes. Seeing us, the houseowner was somewhat dazed and stunned. He appeared confused. In his utter confusion he spread the cleanest 'masnad' (printed sheet) on the floor taking it out from one of the steel trunks in the room. He asked us to make ourselves comfortable and feel at home. The host appeared to have recognized us. We recognized him too because he had been familiar to us as a boatman. With the strange looks that he gave us, he seemed to be wanting to say so much. But he dared not respond even to a hello.

After we had our meals he saw to it that the blankets given to us were new and clean. He conveyed tremendous courtesy to us merely through his gestures. Next day, when we woke up we found a number of children playing in the compound. The children were amply dressed but they were victims of poor hygiene and general poverty. We wondered how these boatmen were able to earn their keep, even while work or business

connected with tourism was no more. We discovered carpet looms in a nearby room in the house. Most of the children, both boys and girls, were working in rows over these looms. We witnessed similar situations in a number of other hideouts in different localities.

Whereas we found some young boys and girls working on the looms, we also found a large number of youth loitering around without any work. They were enamoured of their militant counterparts who were, by carrying and showing off their weapons, exhibiting their new found clout. These youths would often come into our room where they would be visibly encouraged by the militants to join their fold. The militants would often show them all sorts of tricks and fiddle with their weapons in order to impress them. At this sight the elder persons would often call the youngsters out to attend to some household chores.

"Why don't you go to school? Don't you study?", Omkar asked one of the youths.

"Yes, of course. He goes to school. He is in Class IX, but he can't even write his own name properly", the boy's father said in despair and disgust glancing towards his son.

"How come? Is he really in Class IX?", Omkar was intrigued to know, and continued: "How did he manage to come thus far?"

"At the time of every examination we gave the teacher a chicken as a present."

"Chicken?"

"And he would declare him *passed*", said his father pathetically.

"Do you mean to say that all the children have passed like that?" Both of us were pained to know this.

"At least the others can write their names." Hearing this we felt terribly disappointed and sorrowful.

While such conversations were taking place the militants would be watching us and they often felt quite ill at ease

particularly during the first week of our captivity. At these moments we would question them about the reasons for giving up their studies halfway. Whenever such questions were raised we could feel that they were agitated and quite often sighed in despair. In this context one day Nissar narrated his own story.

“I was a very good student in my class. I was also a favourite of my teachers. One day one of the teachers was on leave and our class was on the rampage. Instead of joining the other unruly boys, I was reading a book on religion inside the class room. On hearing the terrible noise the Headmaster of the school walked into the class room and shouted at the boys. He was pleased to see me quietly reading a book. He also praised me for my good conduct. Then he asked me to show him the book. As soon as he saw the book, he flew into a rage and threw it away towards the ceiling. I was grievously shocked and wanted to kill him there and then. Instead I slapped him.” While Nissar was narrating this incident to us, other militants were burning with rage. One of them named Javed said:

“You shouldn’t have left him alive. Tell me what is his name and where he lives. I would pour petrol on him and burn him alive. Tell me who he was!” Javed was delirious with angry excitement as if he was about to commit the crime. “He was a Kashmiri Pandit teacher.” While Nissar said so, Javed and others gave us a nasty look. “But there were two other Kashmiri Pandit teachers who were sympathetic towards me. They had a very good opinion about me. Although I was rusticated from the school, both of them pleaded hard for me. They wanted me to make an appeal for forgiveness.”

“Did you do that?”, we asked.

“No, I didn’t feel like doing that.”

“Didn’t you take any revenge on him?” asked Javed.

“No, I didn’t, because two other teachers from his community were weeping over my fate.”

“The Headmaster was not hard on you merely because he was from another community. Human beings are made of the same stuff. There are good people and bad people in every community. It has nothing to do with religion. He admits that the two other teachers were very kind. For God’s sake don’t have such prejudice”, Kshema said this with pain in her voice.

“I wanted to become a doctor. Alas! this was not to be. Instead, I went across the border to take up weapons”, Nissar’s voice was full of repentance.

“You can continue your studies even now. There is no age bar for continued learning”, Omkar told him encouragingly.

“I wish, I could. But this won’t allow me to do”, he replied pointing towards his gun with a deep sigh.

Javed was one amongst those militants who abducted us from our residence. He was the only one who remained with us throughout the period of our captivity. He was a lean and thin youngman in his early twenties. He was fanatically wedded to his weapons and thoroughly brainwashed in the pan-Islamic rhetoric. Deeply suspicious by nature, he was always eager to overdo his role by keeping too strict a vigil over our movements. Besides he was ever so keen to show off his newly acquired militant’s skills, by fiddling with his weapons. To begin with he wore to a fault the ammunition pouch during day and night. Also, he seemed to be strictly following all those rules and regulations which he had been taught to do.

Over the days, we learnt a great deal about Javed’s and other militants’ childhood. Javed confessed to us that he didn’t love his mother as much as his strict father.

“What is the reason for this?” Kshema asked Javed.

“Since ours is a large family, my mother would always treat my elder brother better than myself. She would give him a major share of the good dishes including meat. I was enraged by such discriminatory treatment and would feel neglected” Javed said.

"How many brothers and sisters do you have?"

"Ours is a very large family. I'm stuck in the middle."

"Did your brothers and sisters feel the same way as you did?"

"I don't know about their feelings; but invariably, whenever there was some mishap by us, the entire blame would come to me. This was my fate in the school as well", he sighed while saying so.

"Which school did you attend?"

"Burn-Hall School"

"Burn-Hall School!", we asked in great surprise.

"I was a good student. I gave up studies after my matriculation. I was a cadet in the N.C.C. and also attended a camp."

"You've good aptitude for military discipline. You should have made a career in the army. Wonder, why you left your studies?" we asked.

"I had a bad time in school."

"Why so?"

"I'd been declared a school tough. One day I was punished by a lady teacher who ordered me out of the class room. I felt terribly humiliated. When she shut the door against my face, I pushed open the door so hard that she fell down on the floor. The teacher fainted, because I learnt later that she was pregnant. There was lot of commotion in the school over this incident. Everybody seemed to be very angry with me. I overheard one teacher saying: 'Javed has become hard like steel. He cannot be remedied.' "

"How sad! What a shame!"

"I wanted to teach everybody a lesson. That made me take this path", Javed said angrily.

Chapter 3

Fugitives

AFTER finishing our evening meals in one of the hideouts we were ordered to put on our shoes, veil, and cap etc. and move on. It was pitch dark and one could only hear the shrill song of crickets. The weather was just fine. We were taken in an open boat which was furnished with mattresses, quilts and pillows. Six militants, both of us, besides two boatmen were seated in the boat as it moved on. Not even a candle was lit to show us the way to the boat while we were moving over narrow and marshy footpaths. They made a chain of hands to lead us on towards the boat. The boat was moving through a maze of marshy channels surrounded by a dense grove of willows. As we moved on we could see a spotless, starry sky and vast expanse of water with dark gigantic mountains visible at a distance, standing like sentinels over the area. Because the night was dark, the sky seemed to be just close to our heads. When the eerie silence was broken either by the wind or the movement of a bird all the militants would get alerted, begin cocking their guns and be battle ready. This noise of guns and their whispers would give us frightful moments. The militants were giving the impression that they were mortally afraid of the other militant groups, rather than the army, because the former might snatch us away from their clutches. Far away, near the mountains, we could see electric lights flickering in small clusters. The militants told us that these were emanating from army pickets.

Our boat halted on the shores of the marsh and we walked into a nearby solitary house. To our amazement the householders were quite reluctant to give us shelter for the night. We were made to stay in a room, while the militants held parleys with the

owner outside in the compound. The leader of the militants group, whom we usually called *Peer Sahib* because we never came to know his real name, was pleading with the householders to give us shelter for the night. It was already well past midnight and difficult for these people to find another hideout at this late hour. The militants did not however succeed in persuading the owner. So we moved on further. We learnt from them later that the owners had shown considerable fear about an impending crackdown on the area by the army.

We spent the night lying down in the moving boat. In early hours of the morning we were in a hideout situated on a river bank. It was a very neat and clean home. We heaved a sigh of relief as we rested ourselves in cleaner bedding. As Kshema went about to wash her face in the bathroom, she met the landlady who was full of fear and apprehension. On some pretext she also went into the bathroom and whispered to Kshema.

"Have they tortured you? Are you all alone with these wolves?"

"No, I'm not alone. My husband is with me. So far they have behaved well."

"Look, I'm a heart patient. I can't bear to see these guns and ammunition. You won't believe me. I've taken two tablets immediately after they entered our house", she said, showing Kshema a bundle of prescriptions taken out of her pheran's pocket.

"You shouldn't be so panicky. They won't harm you."

"No, we can't trust them. They've killed one person in a nearby village and literally lynched him alive."

Hearing these words, Kshema shuddered about our fate.

Soon after that, tea was served to us and the owners asked us to leave the place on one pretext or the other. There and then we crossed the river in a boat and were taken to yet another hideout in a nearby village. The village looked prosperous because many

houses were newly built. The hygiene was however, quite poor. Public water supply was non-existent, although the pipeline was laid upto a nearby village. The villagers were quite sore about this deficiency. At present the people used water from the nearby stagnant pools of marshy water. This, we observed, was even used by womenfolk for cooking and other chores in the kitchen. No wonder, both of us suffered our first bout of acute diarrhoea at this place. This added to our misery and promptly we asked the militants to provide us medicine which we prescribed for ourselves. These were bought for us from time to time. Our stomach didn't really get well after this first bout of infection. At most places we had to have boiled water in order to keep ourselves in a fit condition. This was an additional burden on our reluctant hosts, which however they didn't seem to mind.

We stayed in this hideout for a couple of nights. One day we had a surprise. A well known journalist Ghulam Nabi Khayal alongwith another journalist— a U.S. citizen and representative of the *Washington Post* and Voice of America—visited us during the day. They were accompanied by two top ranking militants of the Hizbullah organisation which had kidnapped us. We were happy to meet Khayal whom we knew well personally and to have the first ever contact with the outside world. We were interviewed by the journalists and our feelings were tape recorded by them. Through these tape recorded messages we made earnest appeals to the President and Prime Minister of India for our speedy rescue from captivity.

We were also lucky to lay our hands on a few local newspapers and were provided with a transistor by the houseowner. We also learnt that an appeal for our rescue was made by eminent people including Professor Soz, Prof. Khusroo, Khushwant Singh, Justice Tarkunde, Rajinder Sachar, Kuldip Nayyar, and Badaruddin Tayabji. This gladdened our heart and we looked forward to our speedy release by the militants. We

were also happy to note that one of the top ranking militants, about whom we have already talked earlier, was concerned about our well being. It seemed that he was keen to impress on the two visiting journalists that we were being treated well. His mannerism and sweet behaviour impressed us a lot. Much later, we learnt that he was the second in command of the Hizbullah, and better known as Shahid-ul-Islam. The other top ranking militant, Tanveer-ul-Islam whom we had met earlier on, permanently wore dark glasses. This would jar us. By his behaviour and utterances he appeared to be a stickler for the fundamentalist and rigid approach of Islam. In fact, during his conversation with us he himself expressed the belief that many of his ideas and ideologies would not readily go down our throats. Hearing such remarks, and before Kshema replied him, she nervously insisted that he remove his goggles first.

"I've got some problem with my eyes. That's why I need to wear these glasses", he explained.

"I don't feel comfortable in conversation when somebody is hiding his eyes behind glasses. I'm sorry. Since you've some trouble, I shouldn't have insisted on this."

On hearing these words, he was somewhat on the defensive, but his friend came to his rescue and said: "Of course, his eyes are hurting."

In the course of our talks with these people we were informed that their organisation had demanded the release of ten persons who were in Government custody in exchange for our safe release. Among these persons was the Chief of their organisation namely Mushtaq-ul-Islam, whom the militants used to call by the pet name Googa Sahib. He was praised a lot by them, and often they would narrate to us many anecdotes about his heroic deeds, fearlessness, truthfulness and polite ways.

We enquired from these people about our fate but they hesitated to give us a clear answer. Instead they said: "The

government is being very unrealistic: They have exchanged nine persons for the release of Doraiswamy. One of those released had a criminal record behind him. On the other hand, our Chief has a clean record. Isn't this a cunning policy ('makarana' policy)?"

"Well, we are Kashmiris. We don't have any clout whatsoever. We are not in service. Who do you think would care for us? We have no relationship with important people. You've done a wrong thing by picking us up", we told them.

"Why? You've done a lot for India. How could they be so ungrateful?"

"We haven't done anything for India. Yes, of course, we have done a lot for our State and its people."

"No, No. We know everything about everybody. You have played a significant part in Kashmir affairs", Tanveer-ul-Islam said this with a tinge of bitterness.

"Yes, I've trained more than two thousand engineers of the State and provided employment opportunities to lots of people. If this tantamounts to committing a crime, then I've done it", Omkar replied vehemently.

At this juncture, other militants intervened and took the visitors to a room upstairs where they held a separate conference. Peer Sahib later saw them off. He also went away and returned after a couple of hours, having gone on a job for locating the new hideout. This practice was usual and often carried out by the group leader during the day.

Peer Sahib was a tall, hefty person sporting a neatly trimmed beard. He was in his late thirties, was quite sober, mature, and a God-fearing person. Apparently he had imbibed a lot of fundamentalist thinking about his religion making him sometimes seem utterly illogical. But deep down, he was a logical and fairly reasonable person. Peer Sahib offered Tamaz' meticulously five times a day and would in fact induce his other colleagues to follow suit. Also, he recited from the Holy Quran in Urdu

translation. His recitations were melodious and pleasing to the ear. He commanded good respect and obedience of his comrades. We learnt that he was a married man having children.

Peer Sahib's other colleagues in the group were Dar, Irfan, Abdul Aziz and Feroze. Dar was a happy-go-lucky person who spoke fast and whom we have always seen on tenterhooks. He was the one who would almost always go on a long recy riding a scooter and was accompanied by Nissar. Besides doing the recy they would get all the needed items from the market nearby, or from the nearest town. They would get shoes, shawls, medicines, newspapers and other clothes which were required by two of us and the militants themselves. Whenever they got these items from the market, all the militants would pounce on them like children and pick up items of their choice for themselves. It was particularly interesting to watch them scramble for cigarettes which everyone wanted in large quantities. The quota of cigarettes was provided to the militants regularly by the organisation. We would often be wonderstruck to see the exhuberance of these persons on receiving these goods. Immediately thereafter, they would use these items without any waiting. It was evident that money for these requirements was forthcoming in plenty.

It reminds us of what happened one day, when a householder's small child sang beautiful Kashmiri songs in our midst. He did so at the behest of Javed and Nissar. We also learnt that this boy was a budding young artist who was accompanying a team of folk singers in the nearby villages. He had a melodious voice and remembered by heart a number of memorable songs of the Sufi saints of Kashmir. We praised him a lot. "I wish I'd some money to give him as a prize." As soon as Kshema uttered these words, Peer Sahib took out a bundle of notes from his pocket, picked up a fifty rupee note therefrom and presented it to the young singer. The boy blushed with joy. Peer Sahib exhibited a satisfied benevolent attitude towards him and said: "Next time,

you'll get more money. Keep it up."

Dar made frequent trips to Srinagar in order to contact his superiors. In their own language this act was described as going to the channel. There were obviously many contact points for the 'channel' outside Srinagar as well. While going on such trips the militants would however not carry with them any weapons. They travelled incognito as normal citizens complete with their personal identity cards.

During most of the day the militants keeping watch over us by turns, would sleep, smoke cigarettes, and eat food. Also to break the monotony they would often comb their hair and their beards, or fiddle with their weapons. Although, we could not converse over their plight amongst ourselves, we did say quietly in German "Sie rauchen, schlafen und essen ganze tag!" (They smoke, sleep and eat the whole day long!) This scene would make us sad and we would feel bored to death. In order to do something to better our plight we would request Javed and Nissar to read out aloud old copies of the *Kashmir Times* provided to us which they would somehow manage to read. Thereby began our teaching sessions for the militants. While we were being kidnapped, Omkar lost his spectacles somewhere and Kshema had left hers behind at home. We felt miserable because we could not read any more. The militants did however, provide us a randomly chosen spectacle which would occasionally help us to read something in bolder print only. Most of these youth could not read English at all but had a smattering acquaintance with Urdu. To lessen our boredom Kshema also requested them to get some pebbles to play with. To our delight, Peer Sahib, Irfan, Nissar, Kshema, and others could manage to play the five-pebb'e game of their childhood with reasonable skill. In some hideouts the householders provided a carrom board which came handy for whiling away time and forgetting for the moment about our agony.

During one of his routine visits to Srinagar for contact with

the 'channel' Dar did not return back for a couple of days. This gave us all a terrible fright. We didn't know anything about our fate. There was no news or clue as to what the government was doing for our release. We didn't get any newspaper, nor did the radio give any information whatsoever. Fear gripped our minds and uncertainty loomed large. The militants were panicky because they feared that Dar and Nissar might have been apprehended and arrested by the police during their trip.

Suddenly on the third day they appeared in our midst with some old newspapers. He enquired from Dar about the latest news about ourselves. His reply was vague and discouraging. That gave us yet another jolt and more sleepless nights. We requested Dar to ask his superiors to consider our release on humanitarian grounds. In particular, we reminded him that Id-e-Milad-ul-Nabi was approaching very soon on 21st September and it would be in the fitness of things for Hizbullah to release us on this occasion. On our request, Dar proposed to tape record a message from Kshema which he would carry to his superiors. In her appeal, she requested leaders of Hizbullah to show magnanimity and broadmindedness by releasing us on an auspicious day like the birthday of the Holy Prophet (PBH). However, these appeals fell on deaf ears.

Fortunately, there were moments when our minds would get the needed rest and respite. It seemed as though God was being kind and generous. We went into one of the nice hideouts which seemed to be a well-off middle class home. We heaved a sigh of relief on being able to have a badly needed bath after a long time. We were pleasantly surprised to get a proper shampoo and soap in this house. After many days we felt somewhat relaxed and at ease. The ladies of the house were quite inquisitive, and they wanted Kshema to interact with them. But the militants did not allow this because the ladies were educated and were likely to stumble upon the truth. We stayed in this home for a very short while. We were

served a good lunch which was followed by tea in the evening. By dinner time, however, the whole household became fearful and uneasy. There were nervous whispers between the militants and others. We could guess that it was time to make a move again.

During the day we had been looking forward to spend a good night at this place, particularly because they had a VCR and a tape recorder to provide some entertainment. In fact, the militants also were inclined to stay in this home for these very reasons. Instead, we had to have our dinner hurriedly. Kshema couldn't eat a morsel, though. We were whisked out from the backdoor of the house, which opened out on a dark narrow lane, for our move to yet another hideout.

The reason given for this sudden ouster was the report by someone that an imminent crackdown by the army was expected in the area. The militants were, in fact, informed that the army was already on the move. This sudden change in their programme caused a serious logistics problem for the militants, so much so that we were made to wait in the open lane for a long while until they managed to get two 'tongas' (horse drawn carriages) for our onward journey.

We were asked to get on to the tongas separately. Each tonga was guarded by our main militant groups and also by some local guides who were also armed. It was a cold evening and pitch dark. The road was long and rough. Abdul Aziz was seated next to Kshema on the front seat of the tonga. Irfan and Javed sat on the back seats. En route, they were apprehending some sort of ambush by the army. Although they were laced with their weapons and ammunition, the fear of any encounter was visible on the faces of Irfan and Abdul Aziz. While the tongas were moving on the dark roads, Abdul Aziz's eyes suddenly fell on the shadow of a large tree which looked like a giant in the dark night. At this moment Javed said:

"Be alert. I feel there's someone moving there." The noise of the horses' hooves would also add to the fear.

"Please move your gun from my knee", Kshema asked Abdul Aziz somewhat frightened and agitated.

As soon as Abdul Aziz began to lift his weapon Kshema felt his hand trembling, so much so that he didn't appear to hold it firmly enough.

"Please keep your gun away lest you shoot my leg", Kshema said trembling with fear.

"It's not a gun. It's a plague!" Abdul Aziz whispered.

"Plague?"

"Yes, people do call it by that name."

Their conversation was suddenly interrupted when Javed shouted an alert signal from behind them. Thank God! we crossed the main roads without any armed encounters. But that was not the end of our ordeal. The tongas moved on, without any lights, over very rough and broken roads. It was obvious that the roads hadn't been repaired for ages. While going towards the next hideout we had narrow escapes from several possible accidents which would have easily pushed us into the watery graves of the adjoining marshes alongside the bund roads.

With our bodies tired and strained, we finally reached our destination. This place was in total contrast with the one we had just left behind during the day. Although the house was newly built, it was dingy, dark and belonged to some poor boatman. Kshema suffered from a severe pain in her neck which was due to her earlier chronic spondylosis. Seeing her in agonizing pain, Irfan volunteered to press her neck and back.

"Shall I press your neck?", Irfan asked her.

"Yes, why not. You're just like my own son."

Irfan was a youngman in his early twenties, obedient, polite in manners and soft spoken. He had no 'lust' for the gun and quite often we felt that he had been forced into militancy. Also, we

learnt he was nicknamed 'Kunal', which in their newly acquired vocabulary meant a person who was a half-baked militant not having been baptized by crossing over to Pakistan and returning back.

"I've seen you and heard your speech before", Irfan said while he was attending to Kshema's neck.

"Heard my speech? Where?"

"In Nawabazar chowk at Srinagar. I was sitting in the front rows. Mr. Kabuli was there with you."

"Oh, I see. That was a rally of the National Conference."

"My father was a staunch worker of the N.C. party."

"How come you've taken up the gun?"

"I was forced to do that. Besides, I wanted to possess a gun of my own."

"Are you satisfied with this kind of life now? By the way, what were you doing before joining as a militant?"

"I was weaving carpets and earning my keep. Now, I'm fed up with this kind of life. As you rightly say, we do nothing except eating, smoking and sleeping."

Unlike Javed and Nissar, Irfan and Abdul Aziz were never really enthusiastic about taking up their weapons when they had to move towards a new hideout. Indeed Abdul Aziz was also called a 'Kunal' by his colleagues and like Irfan he also showed a lot of disillusionment with their life as fugitives. We had observed that Abdul Aziz had sores on his shoulder due to constantly carrying a gun on it. He was a lean and thin man who was prone to illness ever, now and then. Aziz too was adept in carpet weaving and whenever he found a carpet loom around in the hideout, he would while away his time usefully by doing a few stitches thereon.

Since all the militants would call Omkar 'Dr. Sahib', many thought he is a physician by profession. Therefore, he had to treat all the patients amongst the militants and the householders. In

fact, with the use of medicines prescribed by him the people often responded rapidly to the treatment. Abdul Aziz recovered from a chronic cough with proper medication given by Omkar.

It didn't take Kshema much time to mix with the ladies of the household—listening to their woes, and giving them sermons about family welfare and hygiene etc.—wherever she could do so without interference from the militants. Invariably they built an instant rapport and liking for each other.

Together we had thereby begun to build some bridges between the local people and ourselves. At places we called the children to show us their work done at school. They came forward willingly with their satchels full of books. We gave them sums to do or asked questions about their work. It was, however, a painful experience for both of us, as we discovered that the boys and girls in higher classes couldn't even recite the multiplication table, leave aside do many other things. When we found the reasons for this situation we stumbled upon quite a few revealing facts.

“Haven't you done this exercise? How come you're in Class VII?”, Omkar asked a boy.

“They hardly ever go to school these days. One day it is ‘bundh’, on another it is ‘curfew’, then there is a ‘cross-firing’. When there is nothing wrong, then the teacher is absent”, said one of the parents.

“Does the teacher teach you well when he comes? Did he teach you this chapter?”, asked Omkar again pointing to the very first few chapters of the book.

“No, Sir! He said he'd do this exercise later on. He started teaching geometry instead.”

Before Omkar could speak further the boy's father intervened. “When the teacher doesn't know the subject himself, what is he going to teach them? Besides, he hardly ever comes to the school. On one pretext or the other he absents himself frequently.”

"It's indeed a very sad and serious matter", said Omkar with a deep sigh.

"I don't know how they spared this school in our village. Most schools have otherwise been burnt to ashes", the householder said looking meaningfully towards the militants. The militants quietly heard the conversation. We had similar encounters with school children at many places.

"Aren't you bothered by these terrible lapses? The whole educational system has collapsed." We would always ask the militants to ponder over these questions.

"We'll attend to these matters when we achieve our goal."

"Which goal?"

"Achieve complete freedom 'Azadi! Azadi!'"

"And by then we'll be back to square one. There won't then be a single person who could read and write properly. Is that what you want?" Kshema said with remorse in her voice.

"If only these people pay attention to eradicate such lapses, things might look up. In fact, they should use their clout to ensure that the teachers attend work regularly and teach properly", the owner of the house added feeling encouraged by the tone of our conversation.

The owner's elder son was serving us tea. He didn't want to be left behind, and readily joined the conversation.

"You're bothered about education. This is nothing. Worse things are happening before our very eyes. Only last month one militant youth looted a poor person in our village, robbing him of his meagre savings, which he had kept to buy timber for repairs to his house."

Hearing these remarks one of the militants in the group got terribly agitated and said: "Who's the person? Do please let's know. We'll deal with him severely."

"How many militants of that kind are you going to deal with? This fellow had a notorious background and criminal record. He

crossed the border, got himself a gun, and is now bullying and terrorising people in the entire village.”

The faces of the militants turned red with embarrassment. To change the situation and save their face, Kshema said: “Of course, the Hizbullah group is not indulging in such acts. We’ve observed their conduct for sometime now.”

With this remark our captors heaved a sigh of relief, while the householder’s son added: “Yes, they’re different. Their leader Googa Sahib won’t allow them to stoop so low. But, how can they alone influence so many other militants who are mushrooming around here. They are also poking their nose in settling domestic feuds and matrimonial affairs.”

“Freedom has already eluded us. Meanwhile, looting of our forest wealth is rampant.”

“We’ve stopped this menace of timber thefts sometime back. I don’t think such things will happens again”, Peer Sahib said with vehemence.

“You may have stopped these acts, but only the other day, the willow forest in our ‘rakh’ was chopped into shreds and sold off by the militants”, the householder informed them.

While we’re talking, an old man from a neighbouring house dropped into our room. The militants looked at him with suspicion and there was a hushed silence in the room. The old man caught hold of a ‘hookah’ (hubble-bubble) and began to puff at it. He was scanning everything in the room from one corner to the other. His eyes would halt on each of us for a few moments, and we got the impression that he was trying to read from our faces more than what was obvious. He didn’t utter a single word, but at the same time would scornfully glance at the weapons placed visibly by the side of the walls. When he finally left, his unusual silence and stern looks made the militants obviously nervous. There and then, they began their whispering parleys inside the room and outside. By this time they had gained some

trust vis-a-vis us, and revealed their apprehensions:

“Don’t you think this old man was fishy? You never know. He may be an informer”, Feroze said.

“Is it so easy? How dare he inform? Before he does that he’ll be eliminated” Javed added.

“Let’s not bother about that. We’ve got to move to another place anyway. All of you, collect your things and get ready to move”, Peer Sahib instructed all of us.

Chapter 4

Storm in the Wular Lake

WHEN our overloaded taxi finally halted at some place, very late in the night, we were already near a cluster of villages on the banks of a nallah. The vehicle had traversed a circuitous and muddy road most of the time without the use of its headlights. The journey was however piloted by Dar who was riding a scooter with another one on the pillion. En route we noticed a large number of armed militants moving along and occasionally stopping our vehicle and exchanging information with our captors. Every such encounter during our movement from one place to another would give us moments of tremendous fear and deep anxiety about our safety. It was quite evident that the militants were also tense and nervous all the way. We would keep praying, thereby try to remain peaceful, and calm under these trying circumstances.

Earlier, when we had parted company with the family, all the ladies came out of the house to bid us goodbye. One by one, the ladies, old and young, embraced Kshema and sobbed while doing so. Kshema was also quite sentimental and reciprocated while wiping her eyes with a handkerchief. The partings were quite emotionally surcharged and similar scenes were repeatedly enacted whenever we left one home for yet another, almost every evening or more often. On such occasions the householders, both men and women, would subtly plead with the militants for our safety, often quoting references from the 'Hadeeth' (Hadees) to support their pleadings favouring hostages taken in a 'Jehad'. Such moments were touching, heart rending and memorable indeed.

As we entered the new place a great deal of festivity was

going on there. Many unfamiliar faces of armed militants were seen roaming around inside the house and outside on the road. On enquiry we came to know the reasons for the feast of 'wazwan' going on. The houseowner's son had safely returned home after receiving his training in weapons in Pakistan.

We were also able to observe two militants namely, Feroze and Sajjad, rather closely at this time. Dar had got a khaki jungle uniform stitched for himself. Two stars were fixed on its shoulder bands. Seeing this uniform Feroze jumped up and wanted to try it on himself. Before anybody could stop him, he went into another room and changed into this uniform, came back beaming like a child as he exhibited himself in the new outfit.

"How do I look? Like an army man?" He looked at others waiting for a reply.

"You look like a Captain of an army", Sajjad told him with some appreciation.

"Is this the uniform of your organisation? I've never seen you in this before", Kshema enquired.

"We're planning to have this kind of uniform for all of us. But there is a serious lacuna. It resembles the uniform of the army." Dar said rather seriously, giving airs and alluding to his organisation's great resources.

"We can have a change in the colour of the uniform", Nissar clarified.

Feroze was asked to change his new attire and attend to his mundane duties. His nice sense of humour, and a cheerful interest in human affairs, would however take the better of him most of the time. Invariably he would poke his nose into the domestic affairs of the owners of the household. He didn't have any education whatsoever but would sometimes impress us with his pragmatism and worldly wisdom. His other colleagues would not however concede him his due in this respect and would treat his suggestions with obvious disdain. At the same time he'd look up

to us to get more attention and seek our approval for his actions. We would often point out to Feroze that he spoke Kashmiri with a peculiar accent.

"Where do you live?", Omkar asked him in order to know about his language.

"I belong to Srinagar proper."

"But your language is 'dogla' (mixed). Do you have a parent who is a Punjabi?"

This question was never satisfactorily answered by Feroze. To our amazement, this question also put off the other militants as well. They wondered why we had asked such a question at all! We thought they were hiding something.

Sajjad was a good looking youth in his twenties. He was full of vigour and energy, always ready to perform dare-devilish acts. In normal circumstances he would have been an excellent sportsman adept in motor cycle and car races. He was ever ready for daring acts even if it meant some danger of breaking his bones. He was illiterate. He was not enamoured of Islamic fundamentalism, but his lure for militancy was primarily due to the kicks he got from guns and associated activities.

Whereas the militants relished the 'wazwan' feast served to them, we had to make do with some vegetables only. We were not sure as to which day was our 'Ashtami' fast. Therefore, in order to be on a safer side we didn't eat meat for some days. These days were also sacred because of the ensuing birthday of Prophet Mohammed (PBH) and the urs of Nund Reshi, Sheikh Noor-ud-din Noorani.

"Why don't you take meat? I don't feel happy." The householder asked us. He was quite upset because we could not partake of the feast.

"We observe fast on 'Ashtami'. Besides these are sacred days; as you know, we don't eat any meat during this period."

On hearing our reasons, the militants expressed some surprise

and we had to explain to them that in Kashmir there are many sufis and reshis on whose urs people don't take any mutton or egg for eleven days. What we told them was also endorsed by an elderly person who gave the militants many instances of this practice being followed by the people.

After the dinner was over we came out into the compound, where a brand new Mazda mini-bus was already parked for our onward journey. We boarded the bus and soon it started moving. It was jampacked with militants, who included, besides our group, many others who were to guide us during this journey into the wilderness. We were seated covered by curtains made from shawls they were carrying. They didn't even want us to peep into the village streets outside where things were visible under a dim moonshine.

At a crossing, the bus came to a sudden halt. There was a lot of noise made by people near the exit door. Some militants camouflaged and shadowed both of us with their bodies and hands. Peer Sahib and Sajjad discussed something with a person outside. We felt that some policeman had apprehended them. However, they would not let anybody inside the bus. Hurriedly they got themselves out of the mess and directed the driver to move on fast. It was evident that the strangers outside and the militants had reached some sort of understanding. All the while we were tensed up, watching the fishy goings on while every gun was battle ready for 'action'.

The bus finally came to a halt on a forest road passing through a jungle of tall fir trees. We were surprised to receive a pair of new shoes for the ensuing expedition. From here we had to march on foot over a long distance of muddy uneven paths full of boulders. Due to wearing of new shoes, we got blisters on our toes. It was a tedious and tiring journey. After walking a long distance we could no longer move any further. We were tired. Sensing our predicament the militants arranged a 'chhatanav'—a

small, narrow and canoe-shaped boat—for us. It had to float through a tedious, shallow channel full of sandy dunes in between. The boat was fit for a couple of passengers only whereas we were four of us struggling to keep afloat without drowning. The boat was often getting filled with muddy water which had to be emptied continuously. The other militants had waded through marshy swamps taking short cuts.

At long last we reached a spot where a 'khachhu' (huge barge) was ready for us duly furnished with bedding and quilts etc. The 'khachhu' had no roof but only an improvised covering of polythene sheets over wooden frames. The weather had become windy and cloudy. It began to drizzle the moment we reached near this boat.

In front of us we saw a huge expanse of water over which weedy growth of water chestnuts was clearly visible. We realized, to our horror, that we were about to cross the Wular Lake during the night. As our boat moved on, the winds grew faster and waves splashed the bottom of the boat with loud thuds. The boat was violently rocked by the waves and we felt that it would overturn any moment drowning all of us. This arrangement was made by Sajjad who was obviously totally reckless in his approach. We thought him even to be dim-witted and thick skinned.

We were panicky and stricken with terrible fear. On top of it there was a chill in the air, which had already numbed our limbs and feet. The waves were rising high and our beds had been drenched with the splashes of water. Our hearts were chilled with fear. Kshema was shivering with cold, her teeth chattering violently. She wanted to say something but couldn't do so. We held our hands tightly in deep prayer.

"Peer Sahib, please halt the boat, we are going to get drowned. Nobody would even know where we are buried. This is too risky." As soon as Omkar shouted these words, there were louder noises made by others as well. The militants were also

obviously terribly frightened.

"Stop the boat, Sajjad. Ask the boatman to stop it. Being a boatman, you can swim alright. Think of others who don't know how to swim", they all shouted together.

"Don't panic! We'll take the boat aside and anchor it there till the wind stops."

Nobody could sleep on that fateful night. We could hear only some whispers though, and occasional bouts of cough.

"You shouldn't have landed us in this trouble", Peer Sahib was whispering to Sajjad.

"Militancy is not a bed of roses. We've to face these ordeals", Sajjad explained.

Even while the boat was anchored nobody really slept. The planks made creaking noise as everyone was tossing and turning in their beds. There was clatter of raindrops on the polythene roof of the boat. Rain was also dripping through the holes in the roof wetting our quilts, our faces, our hands, and our limbs. The waves continued to splash hard against the boat. The Wular Lake seemed to have risen in fury to smash whatever came in its way.

Far away in the distance, near the mountainside, there were large flashes of sodium light in quick succession. These lights emanated from flares shot into the air by the soldiers in the army camp. We wondered, if our movements were at all seen by the army. No doubt, the militants were ever so apprehensive and alert about such signals. They would not allow even a small torch to be lit during the dark night.

By dawn the lake had calmed down and we felt quite relieved. The weather was clearing up. In our lives, it looked as though for the first time, we realized the unbounded expanse of the Wular Lake, which looked like a vast ocean. The militants woke up and began making tea while the boat was being rowed towards the other shore. Abundant provisions for our breakfast on this dreadful journey were already carried in the boat. Being

chilled to the bone, a hot cup of tea was the most welcome thing that morning. This was so especially for Sajjad, Irfan and Abdul Aziz, who suffered from varying bouts of fever and cough. In fact we suspected Sajjad had an attack of pneumonia for which he was asked to take a dose of antibiotics and paracetamol with his tea.

As soon as the boat reached the other shore, Sajjad, who was running high fever, suddenly took off his clothes and was about to cool himself with a dip in the lake. Fortunately, we noticed his frenzy well before he dived into the water. Kshema shouted at him:

"Are you crazy, Sajjad? What're you upto? You'll kill yourself. You have high fever. Come into the boat and dry yourself", she ordered him.

"Shouldn't I have a bath? I'm burning inside", Sajjad explained.

"I've given you medicine. You'll be very ill. She's right", Omkar said with anxiety.

"Okay then! Let me wash my hair only." Sajjad requested like a child, and was waiting for our directions.

Omkar had to allow him this little luxury after all.

Two taxis suddenly appeared on the road adjoining the shore. That was the signal for our next journey. We were taken to a remote village nearer the hills. There we spent a night in a poor household. By this time Irfan and Abdul Aziz were really tired and fed up with this kind of life. They wanted to get leave which had been promised to them for some time now and go home. All of a sudden, Dar asked them to get ready, pack up and go home. While they were leaving Kshema asked them:

"When are we going to see you again?"

"Never! Not on this mission", they said.

"We may visit your home, if we are alive", Kshema said.

"Insha Allah! you're most welcome" saying so both of them bid us goodbye and left, never to be seen again by us.

“They were very keen and happy to go back home”, Kshema said to the other militants.

“We don’t bother about their wishes.”

“Im aes ‘chhakni’ asi (Anyway we were planning to shunt them off)” Javed explained with emphasis.

Soon after lunch we got geared into our outfit again. We were moved in a taxi on roads cutting across orchards, when we found that there was no way to cross a ‘nallah’. At this point both of us were carried by the militants on their backs. Then we walked on foot a long distance through zig-zag paths and across the backyards of many homes avoiding thoroughfares. We were taken inside a government employee’s home which was neat and clean having a bathroom facility as well. Kshema had a quick bath.

We were served tea at four o’clock with delicious home made traditional ‘Kashmiri roti’. We relished this treat very much. Hardly had we settled down, and were looking forward to a peaceful night, when we witnessed a terrible commotion in the house as well as in the mohalla around. Javed, Feroze, Peer Sahib and others were jittery and panicky. Somebody had seen a posse of paramilitary forces passing though the nearby street. Expecting an immediate crackdown in this area, the householder shunted us out of his house most unceremoniously, our belongings were hidden by him under the staircase, while the militants, fully armed with their weapons, whisked us off through the lanes and backyards of houses. We observed that all the people were shouting at us: “Run away! Run away! They’re coming.” It seemed they’re chasing us away!

While walking through many paddy fields we observed hundreds of armed youth passing by. Our captors were sneaking glances at those militants but avoiding much conversation. From here onwards, our captors changed their strategy vis-a-vis us and began telling people that we were their guests and were searching for our kin who had crossed the border. This strategy was quite

suitable; people were taken in easily by this story, more so because Omkar looked like a perfect 'maulvi' with his white beard and appropriate cap, and 'khan dress'.

Our journey for the day ended in a nearby village. Here we took shelter in a home which was already full with a large group of JKLF militants. They had just arrived from across the border. We learnt that the group, comprising about eighty youth, had been adjusted in various houses. This had given rise to a lot of visible hustle and bustle in the village. Some amongst these youths came into our first floor room along with their weapons. After we had been introduced to them by our captors as their guests, there ensued a hot discussion with them on the topic of Kashmir's independence. The JKLF was emphasizing the cause of independence of Kashmir, whereas our captors' group, namely Hizbullah, was absolutely wedded to the idea of brotherhood with Pakistan and all other Islamic countries. We also observed that our captors didn't reveal the identity of their organisation as such so that nobody would know the truth about us.

On the following day, the militants of the JKLF accompanied us upto the limits of their territory which was a strong bastion of their activities. While crossing numerous fields, we saw a lot of private construction activity in the area. In particular, one massive house, which stood out very prominently, had engaged a large number of construction workers. The owner wielded a lot of clout with the militants as we learnt from them.

"Look at these mansions being constructed. Is this the 'Jehad' going on?", Omkar asked Peer Sahib pointing to the house.

"Aren't people working in the fields, harvesting the paddy, and picking the apples? Life goes on as usual", Kshema added.

Peer Sahib and his colleagues were annoyed by these remarks.

"We have to set those people right who are a hindrance in our path", said one of them.

"We'll see these thieves and exploiters. How they've amassed their wealth?", said another.

"It's the same as before. Only one group of exploiters has been replaced by a new one", Kshema said.

"Don't compare. Those people were traitors. They are kafirs."

"Kafirs! which kafirs?" Kshema asked.

"All those who have sold us to India!"

"You mean the whole population of the State?"

"At least now we've understood the reality. We'll change everything."

"Of course, that's what we've been observing during this journey" Kshema said sarcastically.

"We've to annihilate all those people who are older than thirtyfive. Then only things will improve", Nissar said in a lighter vein.

"I hope Peer Sahib also doesn't fall in that category", Omkar observed changing the tone of the conversation.

En route we stopped for some rest near a famous shrine. We could only see a massive tree from outside the galvanised iron sheet walls. It was an attractive site.

"Let's go inside here and meditate for a while", Kshema expressed her desire.

"It'll take us lot of time. During day time it is not desirable to halt anywhere. We may be exposed", said Peer Sahib.

"It's a very venerable place. I've got a talisman from a saint of this place", Nissar said, showing us the talisman tied to his biceps. He also kissed it. Seeing this, Javed also took out and showed us the talisman hanging round his neck.

"I'm always keeping it with me. I won't get into any trouble. This is my protection", he said while kissing it.

"This's a fetish and is forbidden by Islam", Peer Sahib said authoritatively.

“Come on, Peer Sahib. I wouldn’t be surprised if you too are wearing one yourself”, Kshema observed. Hearing her remarks, all of them had a hearty laugh.

In a jiffy this mood was there no more. A militant of another organisation spoke something to our captors. They had a problem of crossing the main highway where the army was reported to be patrolling on high alert. Discretion appeared to be better than valour. Peer Sahib decided to take both of us alongwith him on a ‘reda’ (horse cart), to enable us to cross the highway fast. He asked his other colleagues to stay behind and attempt the road crossing only in the afternoon.

Thereafter, we moved on foot, and accompanied only by Peer Sahib, who was unarmed, we traversed a long distance through numerous fields and orchards. The onlookers would have taken us to be absolutely normal villagers. Wherever we wanted to quench our thirst, we plucked apples and in between rested a while. On the way we also came across a cluster of houses inhabited by Sikh villagers. Soon after both of us felt quite tired because we had walked fifteen kilometres. We needed rest. Seeing our condition, Peer was in a fix. He was hesitant to leave us alone, yet he was keen to proceed on his recy for a hideout. Sensing his predicament Omkar said to him: “Don’t worry. Take our word. You can proceed alone for the recy and we’ll wait here while we also rest. It’s a gentleman’s promise.”

Hearing these words he proceeded, reluctantly perhaps, on his mission. We were all alone inside a large orchard and in this situation Kshema was tempted to escape from their clutches. However, when we discussed the issue, we realized that such an action could be very dangerous because the whole area was infested with numerous armed youth. Besides, we thought it would be a breach of trust, which would only reinforce the militants’ cynicism.

When Peer returned back after half an hour or so he was

visibly relieved and happy to see us sitting exactly where he had left us. After this episode the group of militants accompanying us were more trusting and open with us. We felt that they also looked upto us in many ways.

We took shelter for the night in a rich farmer's newly built house in a nearby village. There were a number of walnut trees in the compound, full with the fruit, which had been presumably, already sold to a businessman. Stacks of maize were lying on one side of the yard. Nearby we noticed a herd of milch cattle. An elderly lady was tending the cattle, at the time we entered their home. Peer Sahib had already mentioned about us to the householder introducing us as their leaders. Kshema went for a wash downstairs and found a hand pump installed in the compound.

"I want to have a wash. Where shall I've it?" Kshema asked a young lady nearby.

"If you want hot water, then you go inside the bathroom. Otherwise, you could do it here", she said pointing towards the hand pump.

"Do you want some soap?"

"No, thank you. I've mine with me."

While Kshema was having a wash, a couple of ladies from the house and from neighbours were washing their pots and pans at the tap.

"Do all homes have these hand pumps?"

"No, only we've. Although the government has provided water taps no water is flowing in them ever since. Last year, we had a heavy snowfall during the winter. It was very difficult for us to fetch water from the far away riverside. In fact, our daughter-in-law fractured her leg in a fall while fetching water. At that time we vowed to get this pump installed. It's better to live frugally but comfortably", the lady confided to Kshema.

After such conversation Kshema had also to listen to their

mundane and household tales which they poured out innocently.

"We've seen many Sikh families around this village. Are they good neighbours?", Kshema asked them.

"Yes, of course. They are very good. They have saved us on a number of occasions from the wrath of the army", the lady informed.

"What do you mean? What've they done?"

"They wanted to search this whole area but due to their persuasion and pleadings, we were spared this ordeal. You know, they understand their language better."

"Aren't there any Kashmiri Pandits living around here?", Kshema asked.

"Dara Dafa! (To hell with them!) There were a few families here. But their homes and shops were gutted and promptly they left this place." The lady said all this in a derisive tone in order to impress Kshema thinking her to be a leader of a militant group called 'Dukhtaran-i-millat'. Hearing these words Kshema felt a pang in her heart.

"They're also human beings. It's very sad." As Kshema said so, the lady looked into her eyes, somewhat bewildered. It seemed that she was not used to hearing such remarks lately. Collecting her wits she said: "Of course, of course! It's not their fault. It's Kahr-i-khuda (God's wrath)."

"Let's pray. God should show us the correct path to happiness, peace, and prosperity", Kshema said.

"Amen!", the lady nodded.

Towards the evening when the members of the household returned from their fields, they assembled in the room where we were sitting with the militants. We discussed some routine matters with them. It transpired that they had to face many problems in transporting apples. The villagers were lamenting that they had to sell their yield of walnuts at throwaway prices last year on account of disturbed situation in the valley. While narrating these

things the elderly householder told us interesting details about a person.

“The people here used to call him ‘Khoroo’ (naughty bald fellow). He was notorious for his criminal acts. Suddenly, after his return from Pakistan, in a few months time, he was laced with a light machine gun and other weapons. Even his name was changed. Now he is better known as Sher Khan.”

“Which Sher Khan are you talking about? Does he belong to JKLF? Is he a tall, lanky fellow?” asked Feroze.

“No, he’s hefty. I don’t know which one you’ve in mind. There’s a surfeit of Sher Khans amongst the militants”, the villager clarified. Hearing this, the militants were silenced and he proceeded further narrating the unfinished story.

“Sher Khan got married to a pretty educated girl. She was the only highly educated girl in this whole area.”

“Educated girl? Why was she attracted to him?” Kshema enquired.

“Because of the huge amount of money and property he kept in her name as ‘Mahar’ (dower).”

“Was he so wealthy?”

“No, not at all. He acquired all his wealth after coming back from Pakistan. Of course, now he is lording it over others.”

“He may have become a good Muslim now. In that case, Islam allows for forgiveness of past sins”, Nissar said.

The householder looked blankly at Nissar because he wasn’t obviously convinced by what he had said.

Omkar tried to change the subject and enquired: “Which of the militant organisation is dominant in this area?”

“JKLF. But there are others who are also making the rounds. So far, we have never had any search operation by the army. But now we are apprehending a crackdown. A couple of days back a youth was arrested by the army from a neighbouring village. He’s blurted out all kinds of information, so much so that he’s even

told them that his weapon is lying with his mother.”

“Bastard! Who made him a militant?” Javed said angrily with hatred in his eyes.

“He must be a ‘soyat’ (candle wick)! Otherwise he wouldn’t have divulged anything”, Nissar said.

“Who’s a ‘soyat’?” Omkar asked.

“A militant who’s not deeply committed is a ‘soyat’. You know, like a candle wick, he’s superficial”, Feroze explained.

“Oh, I see. You’ve got a whole new set of words in your militant parlance.”

We spent the night here. Next day, after we had lunch, Omkar went downstairs into the yard to ease himself. Peer, Feroze and Nissar had gone for a recy leaving only Javed with us. Before having gone too far, they had seen an army vehicle on the road. This had sent them hurrying back and they were already atop a mound hiding themselves. Feroze was sent back to pick up Omkar only and leave Kshema behind in the house. When Feroze saw Omkar in the compound, he shouted aloud: “Come along quick. Peer Sahib is calling you. We’ve to move ahead fast. The army is coming this way”.

“What about my wife?”, Omkar asked anxiously.

“No, No. We can’t wait. It’s an order. We are in a hurry.” Saying these words very nervously Feroze attempted to catch hold of Omkar and wanted to drag him away. Before there would have been any nasty scene in the courtyard, Omkar ran free and rushed back, upstairs where Kshema was sitting alone. When she saw Omkar’s panicky face she apprehended the worst.

“They want me to go with them. The army is coming, they say. They want to leave you alone here. This can’t be”, Omkar said with fear writ large on his face.

“No, never, We’ll stick it out together; come what may”, Kshema said forcefully.

By now Feroze was standing in front of us and said: “I asked

you to come along."

"You've picked us up together. And we shall move together. We won't go alone. Go, and tell your 'ameer' (leader of the group or organisation)."

Feroze rushed back for instructions, and returned soon after asking both of us to accompany him. He was quite upset, furious, agitated, and fearful. Thereafter, we obeyed his instructions and moved on with him without protesting.

We overtook the other militants, who were waiting anxiously, with lot of pent-up anger against us on top of a mound. As soon as we met, they simultaneously shouted at us in anger: "You don't listen to us. You are being very obstinate and landing us into a mess. This way you'll bring harm to yourselves."

"What harm can you do? Kill us with bullets? Okay. Come on, kill us right here. We're ready for that. We'll save ourselves from this agony." Omkar raised up his hands in anger and was shouting at them furiously.

Seeing Omkar in this state of frenzy the militants were taken aback and stunned.

"We're doing this for your safety. For this we have a tremendous responsibility to our organisation", Peer Sahib explained in a milder tone. Their anger had now considerably subsided.

"How could I leave her behind? Is that proper? You should never suggest anything like that again." Omkar was trying to be apologetic after his bout of temper.

Chapter 5

Heart of the Matter

DURING the long period of our captivity we observed a strange phenomenon. There were houses which were positive and equally, many others were depressing and negative. In the positive homes we felt comfortable, clean and mentally at ease. Whereas, in the negative houses we felt suffocated, ill at ease, and bothered by unclean bedding and general surroundings. The negativity of some places was so intense that Omkar felt like running away or jumping out of the window, not being able to bear the inexplicable torment he would feel in these places for no obvious reasons. Often our misery would be compounded by the presence of bugs and ticks in abundance. Strangely, we experienced these extremely varying emotions almost like a see-saw pattern due to our frequent movements. Living with these extreme situations would reinforce our faith in God's ways and we could appreciate and experience the dreamlike quality of existence itself, which we had often only read about in spiritual discourses. We also learnt to take all the agony or pleasure in our stride with the help of meditation.

Although the militants used to introduce us as their group leaders, yet the cat would soon be out of the bag at several places. On one occasion the host served beef to everyone but due to Peer's intervention we were not allowed to have it. When Peer told us about it, we naturally did not take the beef and the host got somewhat suspicious about our antecedents. Our daily chores were also different in minor ways. For example, we always ate from separate plates unlike the others. Also, we always carried a mug of water with us to the latrine which was most often located outside and away from the house. Most others didn't use any

water at all. They used clots of clay instead which were often provided in the lavatory itself. Kashmiris are very intelligent and notice such differences carefully. Wherever we went people soon discovered something very fishy regarding our presence with the militants, their explanations notwithstanding. In one of the places, the host, having found out our identity, offered to help in our rescue. At the same time, however, he was reluctant to do much because he was afraid that the militants might wipe off his whole family. He took lot of pains in explaining to the militants the good principles of Islam and sermonize them about good behaviour befitting a true 'mujahid'. "If you really follow the path of Islam then you shouldn't forget the dictums laid down for your conduct."

"Once Hazrat Ali (PBH) was about to kill an enemy in battle. While he was sitting on him and was about to slay him, the enemy spat at his face. Thereupon, Hazrat Ali (PBH) got up and left the person unharmed. At this strange conduct, the enemy was taken aback. He asked Hazrat Ali (PBH) why he didn't kill him at all. Hazrat Ali explained to his foe the reasons for his conduct thus: "If I should have killed you after you spat on my face, it would have been construed as killing for personal revenge which is totally forbidden by our Prophet (PBH)."

Such was the conduct of the Prophet (PBH) and his numerous followers. While narrating this story the host further emphasized: "You've to give benefit of doubt even to your staunch enemies."

The militants were told this story by many other householders as well, in order to make them aware of the fact that taking revenge from anybody is unIslamic.

There were other anecdotes which were narrated to the militants by the villagers. Highlighting the exemplary conduct of Prophet Mohammed (PBH) the following anecdote was talked about quite often.

Prophet Mohammed (PBH) was passing by the house of an old Jewish lady. Everyday, the lady would throw all the household filth and garbage on his head. This she did because of spite and hatred against the Prophet (PBH). However, Prophet Mohammed (PBH) was not annoyed at her conduct and never showed any anger towards her. He would shake off the filth from his body and proceed with his work. One of these days, while passing by the old lady's house, the usual throwing of garbage on his head by the lady was missing! When this happened for a couple of days he wondered what could have happened to that lady. So he went up to enquire about the old lady's welfare. He discovered that the lady was unwell. Thereupon, he looked after her and nursed her back to health. The lady who had been so full of hatred for him, was not expecting such loving and kind treatment from the person whom she had always treated with scorn. The lady was ashamed of her conduct and, with remorse writ large on her face, she sought forgiveness from the Prophet (PBH) and joined his fold as a devotee of Islam.

It was evident from such encounters that everywhere the simple Kashmiri peasants wanted to subtly make the militants aware of the basic tenets of Islam. These they had learnt to practice over the centuries and in which there was emphasis on love and compassion rather than on hatred and revenge.

There were strange ways in which such things would often come to the fore. One day, we went to a house for stay during the night. As usual, the owner was told a false story about us. As we sat down in one of the rooms, he shook hands with both of us not really seeing our faces properly because of very poor light in the room. Later he took us into another room, where good electric light was available. The owner was bewildered as he looked into our eyes. He had instantly recognized us, and hiding his face in his hands began to sob.

"What's the matter, please? Are not you happy with our

presence?", Kshema asked him, while she also recognized him.

"I'm wondering at God's ways! You'd have never visited my poor home. And now I see you here amongst us!" He said wiping his eyes.

"That's how it's. Haven't we met before? I think, I've seen you in Dilawar Mir's room?", Kshema said emphatically.

"How come? You remember that occasion? Otherwise, when you become Ministers, you hardly ever remember people. Dilawar didn't recognize me when he was a Minister", he said sarcastically.

"I'm not a Minister any more. Besides I used to recognize everyone who came into contact with me. Do you know him?", Kshema asked pointing towards Omkar, who was sitting beside her.

"Who wouldn't know him? Isn't he Principal of the Engineering College?", he replied.

"Yes. But he is no longer Principal of the College."

At this point the conversation was interrupted as the hostess and her son entered the room with basins full of hot water.

"Please, Doctor Sahib, you must be tired. You wash your feet with hot water", he asked Omkar.

Omkar was quite hesitant and felt embarrassed but they insisted. He got up and allowed his feet to be washed by the host's son. At the same time the hostess washed Kshema's feet, after she showed some reluctance. The couple showed us tremendous respect as guests in the best traditional Kashmiri style.

In this home we were struck by the fact that the householder showed high esteem for his wife whom he treated with lot of love and respect. In fact, he said with beaming pride that all that he possessed was due to his wife. They exhibited healthy and mutually supportive complimentary roles while carrying out the household chores. This atmosphere in a remote village was unusually congenial which made us feel quite at home and

cheerful in their company.

Indeed, the company was so good that we didn't sleep the whole night. We had wide ranging conversation on the topics of politics and social life and the phenomenon of militancy. The hosts were gracious enough to provide tea at intervals during the night in order to make us comfortable while awake.

During these conversations, here as well as at many other places the hosts would throw an open question towards the militants "Tell me, in which book is it written that a lady should be taken as a hostage? Is it proper? I can't understand your plans."

The militants would always dodge this question and somehow change the topic. "We had no other way but to act in this manner. We want our men, and our leader Googa Sahib to be freed. The government doesn't understand any other language", Nissar said.

"What've these people done to you? I don't think they deserved this kind of treatment. There are so many crooks around who are still ruling the roost", the owner said showing sympathy towards us.

"Why? Why do you think they are different? She also worked in the National Conference. They're all traitors. They've robbed us of our rights", Peer clarified.

"You shouldn't forget that it was National Conference which gave back land to the tiller; and provided free education to the people everywhere in the state. How can we be so ungrateful to Sheikh Sahib who did so much for Kashmiris?" As soon as Kshema uttered these words, all the militants were suddenly roused into a fury and said in unison: "Don't you ever mention his name. He was the greatest traitor born on the earth."

"You've got guns and ammunition. You can blow us up in a jiffy, if you please. But that won't silence me and prevent me from telling you the truth. I'm not ungrateful. Sheikh Sahib was

loved by the people. Whatever he did, it was always with overwhelming support of the people. Nobody ever challenged him", Kshema said emphatically.

"People were misled. They were promised something and given something else. People were illiterate and didn't know that they were fooled. Now this cannot happen", one of the militants said.

"I can believe your argument for a while. But this argument could only be true of the year 1947. What about 1975? People were not uneducated then? After twentytwo years' absence from mainstream politics, Sheikh Sahib received a thunderous applause from the people when he made an accord with Indira Gandhi", Kshema said.

"We don't want to hear anything about Sheikh Abdullah and his deeds", Nissar interrupted Kshema.

"You've to listen to me. It's better to know the facts which are still fresh in the people's minds. Truth cannot be wished away. Is it not true that at the time of Sheikh Sahib's death whole of Kashmir swelled out in processions and people poured their hearts out in wailing and tears? Do you want us to believe that it was stage-managed?" Kshema continued with her outburst.

"Nobody can deny that. The people of Kashmir are sentimental. They are with everyone. Aren't we with you now?", the host said.

"Yes, of course because of their guns", Kshema said.

"Don't compare us with those leaders of the past. They've exploited us. They've misused us at the time of elections. Do you know that our candidate was winning in Amira Kadal constituency when he was thrown out of the hall alongwith his supporters. They declared Mohi-ud-din Shah victorious and we were thrown behind the bars. For their seats they can go to any length. They are chips of the same block", said Feroze with bitterness.

"I'm going to take revenge by killing Mohi-ud-din Shah", Javed vowed angrily.

"That was the greatest blunder made by India at that time", the host said.

"But killings are no solution to the problem? You can always go in for fresh polls and make your own government. I'm not so sure though, that you won't also exploit the people. At the moment, you too are exploiting them", Kshema explained.

"What kind of democracy do we have? We don't want any more of this Indian democracy. They have been foisting people on our heads. We never had any say in that", Nissar said.

"Who'd foisted people on your heads?" Omkar, who was listening intently to the conversation, asked.

"India has done so", Peer said.

"Where does India come into the picture? India is only a concept of the constitution. People choose the government themselves. We chose the leaders. You and me have voted them to power", Omkar clarified.

"No, we haven't chosen them. We didn't vote for Farooq Abdullah. Yet he was on our heads. India is not ashamed of its betrayal and misdeeds", Javed said.

"India was responsible for rigging the election", Feroze added.

"Don't you think we should blame ourselves for our misdeeds?", Omkar said.

"We've had corrupt and hopeless governments so far and India didn't bother to look into these things and remedy it", Nissar said.

"In Pakistan, people are severely punished for their misdeeds. Even the hands of thieves are cut off. This teaches people a lesson. In India, on the other hand, the guilty people are even rewarded", Peer added emphatically.

"Don't tell me everything in Pakistan is so rosy?", Kshema said.

"Pakistan is being run according to Nizam-e-Mustafa. These are Islamic rules and nobody can dare indulge in misdeeds there", Peer said.

"What kind of Nizam-e-Mustafa is it? Haven't we seen Pakistani girls on the TV? They are going about normally whereas you have made life impossible for girls here", Kshema said.

"I have been horrified to see many little girls going to school in these ugly scarfs. Is this the freedom you're getting them? Making them look ugly!" Omkar said pointing out the many sad looking little girls we had seen going to 'Madrassas' in the villages.

"In Nizam-e-Mustafa you've to follow the code of the holy Quran and the 'Hadees'. There is no room for any interpretations. It's all written down", Peer said.

"Yes, I can understand that. But the applications of the rule can be different. In those days people used to fight with swords, now you're using these Klashnikov guns. They used to ride on camels; you go about flying on scooters and taxis. Besides, tell me which country has got total Nizam-e-Mustafa?" While Kshema said these words, Peer Sahib was irritated wondering why she had posed all these questions.

"Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Don't you know that?" He said it with aplomb.

"Is 'interest' permissible in the code of Islam? How does Saudi Arabia do banking business with USA? Don't they've billions of dollars invested in USA?" Omkar asked Peer.

"This is not permissible in Islam. We've to stop this thing. That's our mission", Peer said somewhat confused.

"But, the way you are going to change the whole world is not the proper way. Guns have never solved any problems. Pakistan has not done any good by giving you these weapons", Kshema said.

"Pakistan is our big brother. We are grateful to them. They

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

have given us lot of needed help at this juncture. And, besides if we hadn't taken up the gun, who'd listen to us" Peer said excitedly.

"Let me tell you frankly. What she's told you is absolutely correct. Guns don't solve any problem. Look at Afghanistan, Palestine, and Cambodia. Millions have been killed, and even after so many years of fighting they are all going to have talks for peace. Don't you hear the news every day?" Omkar asked them.

"There's no doubt about that. Even Afghan mujahids are having peaceful thoughts. Palestinians fought for fifty years. Now they may also sit with the Jews and talk", added the host reinforcing, in a subtle way, the ideas expressed by Omkar.

During these discussions the atmosphere fortunately remained congenial. Thanks mainly to the host and his wife, who provided a cozy room and lots of tea to keep the mood easy. Nevertheless, the room became quite stuffy with smoke from cigarettes which everyone except, Kshema, Omkar and the hostess were smoking. As Omkar tried to open the window on the hill side of the house, the owner prevailed upon him not to do so.

"Don't open that one. Our lights will be noticed by the army camp."

"Is it so nearby?"

"No, not so near but one has to be cautious."

While we were chatting the hostess got a thermos full of hot tea. For a change the host began to talk on a different topic. He asked the militants: "Are you also fighting for 'azadi' (freedom)?"

"No. We are for Pakistan. It's our brother and we have got 'kalima' relation with them. Our organisation, Hizbullah wants to have a boundaryless Islamic world", Nissar explained in detail.

"I wonder how you can achieve that, when even the Islamic countries are not united. Even in Kashmir, you don't have any unity; forget about the Islamic world. Your goal is terribly vague. I don't know what you want to achieve" the householder said this

giving us the impression that he too was talking sense, and was well conversant with the overall situation.

"How did the burning of schools help in the struggle? Our children have been ruined", the hostess asked the militants while she joined the conversation. Before the militants had replied her question, her husband sarcastically said: "By the time these people achieve their goals, the sons of the 'Khojas' (well-to-do upper middle class) will be ready to rule us and knock at our heads. While these people are fiddling with guns, they are studying in numerous schools and colleges in India."

"Do you think we're fools to let them come and lord it over us? We've had enough of that", Javed said scornfully. With a little pause, he continued: "We've never burnt schools. Hizbullah doesn't approve of such vandalism."

At this point, the householder looked at his watch and expressed terrific surprise. "My God! It's 4 o'clock in the morning! Time has passed so quickly. We didn't notice at all. I think we should take some rest now."

Thereupon they went out of the room. We were left alone in the room for a while.

"I don't know? Aren't we talking too much politics with them?", Omkar asked Kshema, apprehension writ large on his face. "One can't help it. Don't you see how unreasonable and uninformed they are at times", Kshema asked.

"You're absolutely right. At the same time we must be cautious. They can be ruthless and harm us", Omkar said.

"Don't you have any faith in God? Whatever has to happen shall pass. We don't have to fear. We are not hurting them, but they must also know the truth", Kshema added while the militants were soon back again in the room.

Next day, we started teaching the young people in the family. Their son and daughter had both passed the matriculation examination. Their mother was beaming with joy because of her

children's success and said:

"This year the results of the examination were excellent. Not a single student failed in this village. Even those who had failed five times before were declared to have passed the examination."

"That looks strange. What was the reason?", Omkar enquired.

"Due to the intervention of the mujahideen", replied the lady.

"In fact, impersonation was quite common. Those who had crossed the borders and were not present here, they've also passed the examination. Somebody sat in the examination on their behalf", the young boy informed us with a meaningful smile on his face.

"It's not a good thing! It's very sad. How sad indeed!", Omkar said with a deep sigh.

"Sir, in a way it's a good thing. The boys who'd have failed would have crossed the border in frustration. Now that they have passed they are keenly looking forward to join college. After all, college life has its own charm", said the young man. The argument wasn't totally without sense.

The family's two children seemed to be quite intelligent. We patted them and encouraged them for their good efforts. The credit for the good children could squarely be given to the gracious lady of the house. She was very indulgent to us, gave us a change of clothing while she washed our clothes preparing us better for more horrendous days ahead.

In the evening we shifted to a house which bore no comparison with the one we left behind. The house looked lifeless, dull and dirty. Somehow we managed to pass a restless night. Next morning when Omkar went out into the compound for some fresh air he heard two young ladies talking to each other.

"Look at this 'mujahid'. He's parted his hair nicely (Sum kadith mujahid hai chhui)", said one sarcastically.

"They are more keen about their looks", added the other.

"They call themselves mujahideen. Shame to them!"

When Omkar returned inside he narrated these remarks, made by young ladies, to the militants. They didn't take it seriously; instead they had a hearty laugh. Tea was served to us by a young man from a large 'Samawar'. While we had tea, he joined us in conversation on Omkar's plodding.

"What do you want?" Omkar asked this young man.

"Azadi!"

"Azadi?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"Are you caged now?"

"No, Sir!"

"Does the land belong to you?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"Can't you sell your own crops, your fruits, the way you wish? Does anybody snatch the produce from you?"

"No, Sir. I sell my crops as I wish."

"Can you freely pray at the mosque?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"Do you offer prayers on Friday? Are you free to pray five times a day? Does anybody prevent you from doing that?"

"Yes, Sir, I can pray as I like."

"Now if you get 'azadi' (freedom) will you grow a crop of gold in your land?" asked Kshema.

"No, Madam."

"Then why do you ask for 'azadi'? What azadi? What are you going to gain from that?" Omkar asked him pointedly. The young man paused for a while, looked at the militants pathetically and helplessly, not knowing what to say.

"It's these people who say this", he said finally pointing to the militants.

"If you ask me, and in fact, nobody really knows what this 'jihad' is all about", he added with some hesitation in his voice.

As he left the room, the militants wore an angry expression on their faces. They hadn't relished the conversation and minced no words in telling us not to talk freely to the villagers on such subjects.

Chapter 6

Love

WHEN the time came for us to move in the dark to another place the householder was gracious enough to accompany us and settle us there. His help and guidance were needed by the militants because Nissar and Sajjad had not returned back as they suffered a serious accident on the road while they had gone for recy and to buy some essential provisions.

The journey was very tedious and tiring. We had to walk on foot through hilly and muddy paths inside a forest area. We crossed many village clusters and encountered loudly barking dogs everywhere. It was pitch dark and no torch was even allowed to be lit to show us the path. We were sick, tired, and full of fear. The distance traversed was so long that it seemed we walked throughout the whole night. The weather was chilly and ice cold winds pierced our bones freezing our marrow. In hushed voices we asked them: "How far do we have to go yet?"

"Not very far. We're about to reach the place", the householder would tell us.

At long last, we reached a place which was obviously nice and cozy. The house was massive, newly built, and partly still under construction. It was located in an isolated spot away from the village. We were made to sit in one of the rooms inside the house, while our guide and the owner of this house were having some conversation in loud whispers outside. After more than half an hour's discussion between them we learnt that we have to leave this place immediately. On hearing this the militants were quite agitated. While we were moving towards another place Javed was chaffing with anger and remarked: "We'll see and handle this fellow. He doesn't know with whom he's dealing."

Omkar was tired and irritable. With a little pause he said, "You should make certain your plans before you move us from place to place. It's terrible. You should understand our plight. After all, we are not young like you."

There on top of a hill was located a solitary house in the midst of a pine forest, where we finally landed late in the night.

"Please get into the house quick. We don't want any exposure", Javed told us, giving orders.

"What exposure? Go and check up with the owner, if he will keep us for the night", Omkar was shouting at Javed.

"Why are you shouting? We're also tired. Let's go in now."

When we woke up in the morning we saw Nissar and Sajjad limping and haggard. Whereas Nissar was bandaged and had a narrow escape from death in the accident, Sajjad had received only minor bruises. Nissar was crying due to excruciating pain. We felt quite sad to see his agony. For Javed it was God sent work to look after Nissar. He would nurse him like a mother would nurse her child. Also, Omkar was helping Javed in the dressing of Nissar's wounds from time to time.

"How did this happen? I thought you drove the scooter so well?" asked Kshema.

"I'd no clue that the bridge on the highway was burnt. We moved on but very near the bridge Sajjad suddenly warned me that the bridge is no more. I'd no option but to dismount the scooter and throw it aside. You wouldn't have seen us alive, if I didn't do that. We would have fallen straight into the river."

"Oh No! God forbid! You've to be very careful", Kshema said with empathy.

"Even in my childhood I would never do reckless deeds. My father trusted me a lot."

"How many brothers and sisters do you have? What do they do? Is there anyone else who is a militant?" Omkar enquired from him.

"I'm the eldest son of my parents. I am the only one who took up the gun. The others are helping my father."

"What's his occupation?"

"He's a businessman. Besides, he brought us up like a mother."

"Mother?"

"My mother died when we're young. Father didn't marry again. In fact, his relations with his own mother and brothers were estranged. He took a very bold step and separated from his family. Then onwards, we withstood as a solid rock everybody who was our enemy. We made our father like a big dog."

"Made him a dog?" Kshema asked in amusement over this kind of language.

"Yes, he was our dog and we're his puppies. If he'd bark at someone, we would follow suit making a hell of a lot of noise", Nissar explained.

By this time the atmosphere in the room had become quite congenial and Nissar's pain seemed to have considerably subsided. Nissar recited to us some of Kashmiri poems. He received a tremendous boost, as Omkar praised him for such versatile talent. He asked him to maintain a written record of his poems even while he was engaged in militant activity. We could feel that these words were like nectar for him in that it remedied his terribly poor self-esteem.

We noticed similar situations occurring from moment to moment in respect of most other militants we came across during our captivity. The owner of this house was an elderly person with a lot of wisdom. He appeared to be well grounded in his roots which were ingrained with universal traditional values of Kashmir. He told us about his family affairs and was sore about his younger son's wife who had divorced him and gone away. He was however, now married to a lady from a Gujjar clan. This young lady along with another elder daughter-in-law of the house

were also sitting with us.

The elder daughter-in-law was not only pretty but quite clever. She had been to school upto 10th class and was proud of this fact. She narrated to us a story about her experience with city-bred girls.

“We’d gone to Hazratbal shrine for ‘Deedar’ of the holy relic. After we had the ‘Deedar’ we visited a friend’s home, situated nearby. We wanted to spend the night there before we could catch the next day’s bus. In the evening, I had a fright of my life when I saw a girl wearing tight pants and blouse. Her hair was trimmed short like a boy. I wasn’t sure about her sex.”

“You know, that’s why we have to change the whole system. Girls have become immodest”, said Feroze.

“She was not bothered about herself, instead she began to criticize my clothes. I was feeling terribly embarrassed”, the young lady continued.

“Who’re these people, by the way? Please let me know?”, asked Javed.

“They’re our relatives. They belong to a village. Merely by building a house in the city and having different clothes, they haven’t become really different. Have they?”

While she was narrating her experience the younger daughter-in-law came in with a ‘samavar’ of tea. This time she had changed into a new attire complete with smart shalwar-kameez and wearing fashionable spectacles. This was obviously meant to impress us.

While we were having tea a young man with a gun entered the room. He appeared to be familiar with the householder’s family, and belonged to Hizbul Mujahideen outfit. We also noticed that Nissar knew him and therefore, he was not unduly alarmed.

“Where have you come from?” asked the houseowner.

“We have had ‘action’. A number of militant organisations

participated in the 'action'." He was boasting like a war hero.

"Action? Where did it happen?" The other militants curiously asked for details.

"In Reunen."

"Any casualty?"

"One civilian was dead. Several army personnel were killed."

He didn't appear to be telling the truth, nor did he seem to have taken part in any 'action' whatsoever. He was merely trying to impress our captors with his own valour.

Looking at both of us with inquisitive eyes, he continued with his conversation. "The army killed some civilians in a crack-down. Then the dead bodies were put into gunny bags and placed under road rollers."

"Bastards! They've no mercy for human beings." The other militants uttered these words with extreme hatred.

"Do you hear what is happening? We've been telling you all the time about their cruel deeds. They're our enemies", Nissar told us emphasizing their animus against the paramilitary forces.

"Whosoever wields the gun becomes cruel and ruthless in such situations. But, I wonder, why should anybody put dead bodies under a road roller? It's very sad. Who told you about this?" Omkar asked all these questions rather bewildered.

"It's happening all the time. This is precisely what we are up against" Javed said trying to impress the householders about the extent of atrocities being committed by the forces.

"May I say something? I hope you won't mind some plain-speaking. Please forgive me. The army has been around here from the year 1947 onwards. Never before in my memory have they come into the villages or near our homes. We have brought this trouble on ourselves", said the elderly owner weighing his words carefully. "Haven't we?", he asked.

"Freedom doesn't come without any sacrifice", Peer said.

"Then they themselves shouldn't do such wrongs."

"What wrongs? Who?"

"Mujahideen are behaving in ways that don't behove them. They are committing terrible misdeeds including bad conduct with girls." While he was narrating this, Kshema felt emboldened and added, "I was told twelve girls have been molested after being taken across the borders."

Hearing these words the militants got furious and shouted: "This is all wrong. Everything is exaggerated by the 'Khojas'. We know whose work it is."

"You tell us the truth then."

"Only four girls have been taken across the borders. Two of them got married there properly and two others have come back", said one of them.

"Have you asked those girls what they have gone through?" Kshema posed the question very seriously.

"I know who must have told you this story. We'll bring him to his senses", Javed said.

We lost all track of Peer Sahib from this point onwards. He had gone back to a previous hideout to bring back goods left behind earlier. But he didn't return. We learnt later that he too suffered an accident with the same jinxed scooter that Nissar rode earlier. He had a narrow escape from death.

Now onwards, our captors depended on the Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) organisation for guidance about hideouts, because of their predominant clout around these places. Accompanied by the militants of the HM, our group moved on to a faraway village situated on the bank of a lovely mountain stream. Outwardly the house looked like a large village house, but the room in which we were kept was richly decorated. A TV, tape recorder, and VCR being available for entertainment. Because of the nearness of the mountains and the forests we thought that this village is not very far from the border. The place was beautiful, truly like a tourist resort. To our pleasant amazement, the next-

door home had an ultramodern and beautiful bathroom fitted with the best of sanitary fittings and geyser etc. which the hosts placed at our disposal. It was evident that the village was potentially rich in resources.

During our stay here, we were introduced to a person who made a very deep and lasting impression on us. A person with a thin and lean build, handsome disposition and very humble approach, he wore a very ordinary kind of Kashmiri dress. He was called Ali Mohd. Dar by his militant colleagues. We wouldn't be sure if that was his real name. A member of the HM organisation, he appeared to be a very senior ranking office-bearer of the Hizbul Mujahideen (HM).

As we settled down in this place, Ali Mohammed reassured us: "Be relaxed. Please feel at home. The owner is our own man."

He went downstairs and returned back with two other young persons, who were owners of the house. We were served tea alongwith biscuits and this provided everyone an opportunity to talk.

"This area belongs to HM. Although there is no difference between our organisation and the Hizbullah, yet there is some variation in approach. Both the organisations are however in favour of Pakistan", Ali Mohd. said.

"Pakistan? Why not independence?" Omkar interrupted him.

"It's not possible to have our independence when we are surrounded by two big powers. We'll be crushed in between."

"We're already with one big power. Then what's the idea of breaking from one and joining the other?" asked Omkar.

"We believe in Nizam-e-Mustafa. This is not possible in India. Besides, we've got Islamic brotherhood with Pakistan. We are indebted to them for their cooperation and giving us training and arms. We've seen enough of secularism", he said emphasizing the last sentence rather scornfully.

"But in our State there are others besides Muslims; Hindus,

Sikhs, Buddhists. What about those people?" Kshema asked for clarification.

"In Islam, it is the most important dictum that minorities will be absolutely safe and protected."

"Safe and protected? How do we justify the killings of so many innocent people?" Omkar asked him.

"They were not innocent. They were informers", said one of the youngmen from HM.

"It is very easy to condemn people to death by labelling even innocents as informers", Kshema said with some sadness in her voice.

"There could be a few cases of innocents suffering. But what was the justification for Kashmiri Pandits to leave the valley in such a way?"

"We have been asked this question by many militants in different places." Before Omkar could complete his remarks, another HM youngman joined in rather excitedly.

"We know why they all left. Governor Jagmohan asked them to quit so that he could order bombardment of the valley. Thereby he wanted to get rid of Kashmiri Muslims."

We were taken aback by these remarks. We felt very sad and hurt.

"Are you aware that a Kashmiri Pandit youngman was mercilessly shot dead while he was hiding in a rice drum. The whole rice was blood red. No mercy was shown to his wife and children who wept, begged and pleaded with the man's killers. This is only one instance. Not a day passed when two or three Kashmiri Pandits were not killed in a day. Do you want me to believe that people wouldn't be scared. And their kith and kin wouldn't run away at the first opportunity", Kshema said with tears in her eyes.

"This hasn't happened in the villages. Why did they leave then?"

"Only the other day we heard in a village that their houses and shops were burnt while they were still living there. Where would they go after such an ordeal?" asked Omkar.

"You've no idea what has happened in the city and other towns. Prominent people were picked up and mercilessly killed. We have lost the count."

Nissar, Javed and Feroze were listening intently to the ongoing conversation. At this juncture Nissar butted in and said:

"Bitta Karate had vowed that unless he would kill one Kashmiri Pandit a day, he wouldn't touch his evening meal. It's a fact."

Ali Mohammed and his colleagues felt somewhat embarrassed.

"So many Muslims have been killed too. They haven't left?"

"No, you are misinformed. Those who have suffered thus have run away for the safety of their lives. Their number is equally large."

"We know who they are. They are the traitors and the rich people", Javed added.

"What do you mean? Traitors? Who're they?", we asked.

"Those people who have always betrayed us. And at the time of our need they have left us in the lurch."

"Whom do you talk about?"

"Well, who else? Dr. Farooq. You'll defend him. If he's a leader why did he leave Kashmir?"

"We didn't leave Kashmir. We had two attacks of arson, and a bomb blast in our house. And now you've picked us up. How do you explain it?", Kshema asked in an angry tone.

"We haven't done the attacks of arson and bomb blast", Javed said.

"There are so many organisations; whom shall we blame? But, at the same time you kidnapped us. Why?"

"It's politics", Ali Mohammed said.

"If these moves are politics, then why are you embittered with other politicians whom you call traitors?", Kshema asked.

"Their politics was dirty. They have cheated the people and misled them."

"I don't think people were misled. Everything was as open as daylight. Nobody was betrayed", Omkar pointed out.

"O.K. if I agree with you for a minute, don't you think they should have stayed put it here?" Before we could answer this question, our captors joined the issue and almost in one voice said:

"They've got a soft corner for Farooq Abdullah and National Conference. She's been defending the Sheikh family all along."

"We are not defending anybody. The question is not personal. If it were that, then I have had tremendous injustice done to me at the hands of Farooq Abdullah." Omkar's words took them all by surprise.

"What injustice has he done to you?" they asked.

"It was absolute vendetta! She broke with Farooq and joined G.M. Shah who became leader of NC (National Conference). As soon as Farooq came back as Chief Minister, the first thing he did was to snatch my job seven years before my retirement was due. The case is still pending in the Supreme Court", Omkar said.

"Taking revenge is unIslamic! What justice will you get in India? How long have you been fighting? That's why we want to break away from India. This is your plight. What will happen to us?" Ali Mohammed said trying to score a point in argument.

"You should have come to us for justice. We'd have set everybody right", Javed said emphasizing the kind of speedy justice they dispense with guns.

"We don't believe in guns. Ultimately one has to go through the legal channels. We are fighting patiently. I'm sure God will help us", Omkar replied.

"Do you know that Dr. Farooq was one of the Founder Members of JKLF? It's a well known fact", Ali Mohammed said.

"But he's not reliable. That's why he ran away. He set the ball rolling here. Now where is he?", added one of Ali Mohammed's colleagues in anger.

"For this kind of lapse, he is 'wajib-ul-qatal' (fit for elimination)!" added another angry colleague.

"And for this we don't need a fresh jury", chimed in another with hateful eyes.

"You shouldn't have hatred for anyone, even though he is your enemy. Only yesterday we heard the Jewish lady's story whom Prophet Mohammed (PBH) nursed himself", Omkar told them.

The conversation rambled from topic to topic. The breaking up of the Soviet Union into autonomous republics also figured in passing. Religion came up for discussion and mentally we roamed from country to country and place to place talking about politics and socio-religious scenarios. During these deliberations Ali Mohammed also seriously pondered over the Kashmir tangle and wondered how people are going to unravel the situation.

"As I see it, ultimately we shall have to sort it out by a dialogue. You see, what's happening in Palestine, Afghanistan and Cambodia? Years have been wasted and millions have been killed, what is the result? Haven't all of them now come to the negotiating table?" Omkar asked in a philosophical tone.

"Without guns, nobody would have heeded us", Ali Mohammed tried to justify his stance.

"Don't you think there has been enough bloodshed yet. Thousands have died. Don't Kashmiris deserve some peace now?", said Omkar.

"Who'll be the people taking part in such a dialogue?", Ali Mohammed enquired meaningfully.

"It's upto you. First of all, you've got to be united. Then you'll choose the leaders. By the way, who'd be your representative?", Kshema asked.

"They don't know about the Council?", Ali Mohammed's colleagues said.

"Which Council?", asked Omkar.

"Jehad Council. Five pro-Pakistan organisations are now under the command of this Council. We do have unity."

"Who's the leader?", asked Kshema.

"There are many but the most prominent amongst them is Ali Shah Geelani. He belongs to Jamat-i-Islami, but that's the parent organisation of HM", Ali Mohammed replied.

"In that case, all the representatives of the former political organisations as well as the new militant organisations will participate in the talks."

As soon as Kshema uttered these words, all the militants present there sprang up on their feet as if stung by a scorpion.

"No, No! Not at all! Not by any chance shall we allow any traitor to speak up for the people", they said.

"How do you define a traitor in this context?"

"Those persons who have sold us to India. They have forced all kinds of laws on the people over the years. We don't believe in that constitution", Ali Mohammed said.

"You don't believe but what about Geelani Sahib? He was a member of the Legislative Assembly for so many years? You're obviously having double standards for different people", Kshema sought a clarification.

"Genug!" (That's enough) Omkar whispered to Kshema in German trying to avoid offending the militants.

There was a slight pause in the conversation and silence for a moment, which was broken by one of Ali Mohammed's colleagues:

"We've also heard that at the time of his son's admission into a Medical College, Geelani Sahib had approached Sheikh Abdullah who obliged him."

"Yes, the seat was given to him in order to silence him",

added another HM colleague.

"Of course, he too will not be in the picture. He belongs to the old guard", clarified another militant colleague of the HM.

While we were chatting with these people the room was stuffy with smoke from their cigarettes. Everybody except Ali Mohammed and Omkar were incessantly smoking throughout the night. We began to cough and were choking with the fumes.

"Please open the windows for some fresh air", Omkar requested.

"These people have been chain smoking over these days. Javed is the worst and the youngest offender in this regard. He smokes even while he sleeps, and the first thing he grabs in the morning is a packet of cigarettes. I've been warning him throughout, but my advice has fallen on deaf ears", Kshema was complaining to Ali Mohammed.

"I don't know why you smoke so heavily. It'll spoil your health. In Islam the foremost dictum is to have self-control and discipline", Ali Mohammed admonished his colleagues.

Ali Mohammed impressed us as a logical, educated, and reasonable person who although fairly well-versed with the Quranic injunctions, did not wear his religion on his sleeves. Even in respect of worldly and social affairs he was quite well informed and rather pragmatic in his approach. When we discussed with him about the futility of the youths' activities, and how energies were being dissipated which could be channelized into productive ventures, he agreed with us and emphasized that he was planning to establish a cooperative dairy farm in his village. He also expressed his keen desire to see every child in Kashmir being fed at least a cup of milk a day besides proper food. We praised him for such laudable ideas and wished him all success in his venture.

Ali Mohammed arranged a truck for our next journey. The truck was owned and driven by a Sikh gentleman. We left the village soon after tea in the morning, and looked in askance at this

thought; however, accompanied by Ali Mohammed and others we boarded the truck. We became aware of the tremendous clout wielded by Ali Mohammed in this area. We noticed that any road block or obstruction was cleared by the people in a jiffy as soon as he would show his face to them by leaning out from the window of the truck. This happened at several places while he passed through orchards full of trees laden with throngs of red delicious apples and the many village bazaars. Truck loads of apples were also being carted away by many Sikh drivers in this area.

As our truck went along, the driver—who was unaware of our identity—smelt something fishy, when the militants suddenly asked him to follow a risky, narrow, and unapproachable road. At this point, we noticed his nervousness and helplessness. “Don’t worry. Everything will be all right”, Ali Mohammed said reassuringly asking him at the same time to stop the vehicle and come down. He took him aside and whispered something in his ear. After this the driver mechanically followed their instructions. En route he was asked to cross a major highway at breakneck speed, in order to avoid the army patrols. Once this was achieved, they were gloating in a victorious mood, for not having had to use their cocked weapons.

We disembarked after a long journey—which lasted nearly three hours—at the banks of Pohru Nallah. Ali Mohammed handed over our group to another colleague of HM hailing from this area, who was called out from one of the houses nearby. The truck driver was adequately paid by our captors before he went away. We said goodbye to Ali Mohammed whom we did not meet ever again.

Chapter 7

Chessmen Murdered

KSHEMA was ordered to wear her veil and remove her shoes in order to get ready for the river crossing. The boat was anchored away from the bank because of shallow water near it. So all of us had also to remove our shoes and wade through water upto that point. As she began to untie the laces of her shoe the gentleman from HM politely said:

“You’re our guest. We don’t want to put you to any trouble. I’ll carry you on my back.”

“I’m not easy to carry. I’m rather heavy”, Kshema pleaded

“Oh! No. Don’t worry about that. I’m not so weak either.”

While he said so, he did indeed carry her across upto the boat. Nobody took any notice of us because we were like an innocuous looking village group.

Once across the river, we walked upto a nearby village and were taken into an old, elegant and simple house. What struck us immediately was the excellent carvings on the woodwork of the doors, windows, and rafters etc. which was reminiscent of the classical Kashmiri architectural style. We were seated in a modestly furnished but clean room, with bolsters to rest our backs against the wall.

A little later we were greeted by an elderly lady, who entered our room along with her pretty granddaughter, who had been married only two months back.

“How long are you going to keep her here? There is lot of work to be done in our home”, the gentleman who had accompanied us, said to the old lady.

"You're getting very impatient, she had come back here only a few days ago. Do you know, in our times, after marriage, we used to stay in our parents' home for years together. Here you are; she has been married only two months back and she has many visits to and fro", the lady complained mildly.

We felt that this gentleman was the young girl's husband because he was talking so intimately about her. However, later we came to know that he was her brother-in-law, as she made some enquiries from him about her husband and their household.

The old lady sat with us for some time. In the course of her conversation with our host she enquired:

"Do you know the whereabouts of Nazir lately? We were shocked to learn that he has a bullet wound on his leg. We had sleepless nights."

"He's better now and recouping fast."

"I wish he'd come home. For his safe return, I've kept a promise of an offering to our patron saint."

"Rubbish! We don't believe in these things."

The old lady was annoyed and gave the youngman a nasty look. At the same time, we also felt quite hurt by his crude and irreverent remarks.

"Keep quiet, Rashida! You may come to harm", the old lady admonished him.

We learnt here that our host was Abdul Rashid by name. He was a tall, handsome, cleanshaven gentleman of mild and polite disposition. It was evident that he was thoroughly brainwashed with the nascent fundamentalist thoughts on Islam. However, we soon found that Rashid was actually quite reasonable and open minded. When the old lady left the room, Rashid tried to clarify his stand to us.

"People are stuck in their superstitious ways. All such deeds are unIslamic. We have to correct them according to Islamic teachings."

“You can’t wash off thousands of years of cultural practices like that. These are part and parcel of our very being. Didn’t you notice how much you hurt her when you uttered those irreverent words”, Kshema told him.

“Of course, we have to administer shocks to the people to get them out of their ruts. Whatever comes their way, they go on worshipping: whether it is a tree, a horse, a donkey, or a grave. Somebody is ‘Kulbab Saib’ (Tree God), somebody is ‘Guribab Saib’ (Horse God), another is ‘Tulbab Saib’ (Mulberry God)! This is utter nonsense and not allowed in Islam”, Rashid said zealously.

“Faith is, after all, stronger than the saint himself. This is well known.”

“Islam is the religion of the world. There is no room for non-sensical beliefs in this religion.”

Kshema was quite annoyed by these statements made by Rashid. “Why do you’ve to emphasize every moment the greatness of Islam? Who denies it? Geeta is a great scripture. Do I have to go on repeating that it’s great? Isn’t it obvious? You’ve got a nose on your face. Do I have to repeat every now and then that you have got a nose on your face? If I do that for ten days, undoubtedly you will then begin to search for your own nose! Do you see my point?”

With this argument, Rashid was a little puzzled for a while, but recovering himself, said: “Muslims shouldn’t worship trees and make ‘Teher’ (yellow rice).”

“I think you are confusing culture with religion”, Omkar told him.

“This practice has nothing to do with religion. You can observe these customs and yet be a good Muslim”, Kshema added.

Feroze, Nissar and Javed were very keenly following the arguments going on, while they also prepared some walnuts and

apples for everyone to eat. The young lady had brought these for us.

"There's no doubt that the people love these customs and enjoy them. They've unshakable faith in these traditions" one of Rashid's colleagues informed us.

"A South Indian Hindu will shudder at the thought of having meat, fish, and fowl on 'Shivratri' night. But we Kashmiri Pandits offer these things to Lord Shiva first, and then eat it ourselves. Other Hindus are vegetarians and will never think of eating such things themselves leave aside offering them to God! These differences don't make us less of a Hindu. This is our cultural practice and our heritage. Similarly the practice of having 'Teher' is very peculiar to Kashmiri Hindus and Muslims only. It's part of our culture. We needn't force changes in these", Kshema said.

"I repeat, culture and religion are to be seen separately. Culture is based on geography, climate, local traditions, and the racial characteristics of the people. Being a good Muslim has more to do with character, conduct, supremacy of God and such matters. The two are not in any conflict." Omkar explained further as he felt that Rashid and others were prepared to listen.

We were now ready to have our lunch. As it turned out, the lunch was very sumptuous served in the Kashmiri tradition and style. We were the guests of Rashid, who in turn was the honoured guest of his brother's in-laws.

During the lunch, the question of Kashmiri Pandit exodus was brought up again by an educated youngman of the household who had just joined us. We had to explain the issue for the umpteenth time, which we did. However, we also added:

"Kashmiri Pandits may be poor; they may starve; may be desperate or do anything for survival; the one thing however, that they will not easily allow to go by default is their children's education. Nor will they ever easily compromise on this issue."

"Undoubtedly, this is true. I know of my neighbours who

have given up everything for the sake of children's education", Nissar informed everyone.

"When a Kashmiri Pandit baby is born pen and paper is placed on his head. As you know, what has happened to education here? How could people with young children stay on?", Kshema explained.

We moved from this place in the afternoon. Walking through private lands and orchards, we arrived at a secluded place in the midst of a dense orchard where a new house was under construction. Only one room in it had been furnished for our stay during the night. The doors and windows were fixed temporarily in a makeshift manner. The house belonged to a middle aged couple who had a profusion of children, their ages varying from one to twenty years, who occasionally peeped into our room, and later in the evening, sat in a row cuddling together just in front of us. Rashid was quite familiar with this family and so also were his other colleagues.

"Have you formally entered this house? When did you do so?" Rashid asked the new host and his wife.

"No, it's just that we have come. We haven't celebrated 'Grahpravesh' (house warming) as yet. Of course, you would be properly invited on that day", replied the householder. The moment he said so, Rashid looked at us meaningfully as if he wanted to convey:

"Look, isn't this a fetish?" But outwardly he only shrugged his shoulders.

In the evening when we settled down to a chat with the hosts and the militants, the topic of superstition came up again. This time Rashid was not as critical and sarcastic as in the morning, but rather listened carefully to what was being narrated by the host.

"Our sacred shrines are not insignificant places, as many would want us to believe. These are very powerful indeed,

blessed as these are by great Sufis, Reshis, and long tradition. They have merged their lives with the Supreme Infinite (attained Fana). Thereby they have attained such greatness."

"Who can deny their powers?" Nissar said.

"But, unfortunately, these people don't want to pray at these shrines", the host said looking towards Rashid and his colleagues.

"No! No! This is not true. We do have faith in these things", Feroze said vehemently.

The host's young daughter, in her late teens, stood on the doorway and called Javed outside for some errand and readily he went with her. Earlier she had been in and out of the room a few times doing small errands while tea was being served to us. Generally, the other children had also been quite inquisitive about the militants' weapons and pouches of ammunition. Omkar observed the children with deep interest. The young girl seemed to have fallen for Javed's youthful good looks in an innocent way. He was amused to watch their calf love and the humanness of it all.

The host continued with his conversation in the meanwhile.

"I'll tell you about the terrible instance. Our neighbour's daughter was married to a youngman with all pomp and show. Later the bridegroom was invited to a 'Phirsal' (return feast after marriage). On that occasion the family had made an offering of 'Teher' (yellow rice) for thanksgiving. The bridegroom, being a 'kuttar jamati' (staunch fundamentalist) disapproved of this action and kicked away the big pot of 'Teher' with scorn and disrespect. The youngman's rude and untoward action had shocked and stunned the whole village. To our utter disbelief and amazement, not long after this sad incident, the whole of the bridegroom's family were totally decimated."

Everyone was listening to the host attentively and he felt that

he had made some dent in the militants' mind. Encouraged by this he continued:

"In another instance a person, who was mad about his fanatic beliefs, got a sacred tree chopped off into many pieces. Only a couple of days after this episode, there was a crackdown by the army in that village. There, during the crossfire that ensued, only one person was killed and he happened to be the very same person. The bullet pierced his forehead resulting in his instantaneous death."

Everybody was stricken with awe contemplating about the fear of the unknown.

Omkar went out into the compound and found Javed chatting fondly with the young girl. When his eyes met Javed's, Omkar gave him an expressive look.

"Go and help these people inside. They're going to serve the meals."

Javed did not utter a word but promptly obeyed Omkar. We'd been dinning into their ears the idea of self-service in the host's family, so that they would not idle away their time fruitlessly like drones. Thereby the burden of physical work on the householder's family was also considerably lessened.

Next morning when we were about to leave this place Rashid asked:

"Shall I say 'Namaskar' to you or 'Salam-wale-kum'?" As he said so another militant added: "You can't bow before a human being. It's unIslamic." 'Musalmans' bow only before God."

"How sad! Have you pondered over the meaning of 'Salam' and 'Namaskar'? What difference does it make? 'Salam' says Peace be to you; and 'Namaskar' means I bow before God. Don't you believe that without God's will nothing exists. God is manifest in everything. This whole universe is God's creation. Therefore, existence itself is the one God. How does the question of bowing before a human being arise?"

Having heard this clarification that we offered them, they looked up to us with apparent appreciation. The host, standing nearby further added:

“Allah is one and only one. You may remember Him in different ways. Basically, there is no difference. That’s how I feel in my humble way.”

Rashid and his two colleagues saw us off inside an orchard and bid goodbye. They showed us the way ahead through a maze of farm land. Accompanied by our captors we moved on. We walked a lot; then got hold of a passing truck in between; and at last we got in a ‘tonga’ (horse cart) for the final lap of the journey. When we got down from the truck, we were in the midst of a village square, full of people, shopkeepers, and passersby. The ‘tonga’ was already about to move with its passengers. They looked like government officials who were in a hurry to reach their respective offices. Nissar and Feroze went towards the ‘tonga’, and the passengers immediately jumped down from it, leaving it free for militants’ use. The driver also obliged them instantly without uttering a word, until we were all seated in the vehicle which moved on.

On way to our destination the driver pointed out to the militants some orchards and said: “Look at these orchards. These belong to Pandits. God knows, why these are all dried up! There isn’t any fruit at all. The trees are finished. These orchards were earlier a pride of the whole area!”

“When there is nobody to look after, how would these survive?”, Nissar said.

“I don’t believe this. On the other hand, I think it’s plainly due to the fury of the God over Kashmir. He’s Almighty, He alone will sort out things”, the driver said heaving a deep sigh.

The driver was paid by Nissar an appropriate amount for this journey. But he was not satisfied. He asked for more. There were some arguments.

"Don't you know how much risk I undertook? I lost my other customers too. I'm not being unreasonable at all."

In such a contingency the militants had no option but to pay him the amount he demanded. They didn't want to expose themselves to the inquisitive gaze of the onlookers who had already begun to assemble and watch the scene. Javed quickly shooed them off and we walked briskly through a few lanes and by the side of what looked like a powerful saintly shrine. What impressed us as unique, was the presence of abundant flower gardens attached with the houses in this village. Perhaps people make offers of flowers at the shrine. We couldn't ask anyone. We were not supposed even to ask the name of the village. Soon we entered into a house where we saw many youth seated on the verandah. We were taken in from a backdoor, and shown into a room upstairs. There we settled down to have some well deserved respite.

This house was a central place, serving as a hideout for different militant groups, whose members assembled here in good numbers, causing a lot of hustle and bustle with their activities. It looked as if some festival was being celebrated by our host. There were no excuses given to the host about us. He seemed to know instantly who we were!

He was a nice gentleman with a broader outlook, who extended a warm welcome to us having been apparently quite pleased to receive us. As he entered our room he said:

***"Dane dane par likha hai khane wale ka nam* (every morsel is ordained by God for each one of us). As long as you've got to share these morsels, you've to bear with it. God's ways are unique. It'd be impossible to invite you over to us, so God made it easier for us and brought you here to partake of our humble offerings of food."**

Gradually, as he introduced himself subtly, we learnt that he was a prominent political worker of the Congress (T) before the

present turmoil began. He had dramatically changed his course soon after he was placed on the hit list by the terrorists. Thereafter, it didn't take long for his home to become a meeting place for them, more so because he'd pretended to be more loyal than the king.

As the news about our arrival spread in the house, the curiosity of the militants took the better of them, and one by one they all wanted to meet and talk to us. Their occasional peeps into our room, before many of them actually met us, made us feel like objects of a zoo! Ultimately, their curiosity was only satiated when they would sit and chat with us. Most of the groups present in this house, around this time, were pro-independence, namely JKLF and some allied outfits. We have had an opportunity of wide ranging discussions with many of these people on politics and related subjects vis-a-vis the Kashmir situation. One of the young people amongst these groups named Mohd. Maqbool (that was the name he declared to us) was intelligent, well informed and vociferous about his beliefs. On top of it, he had persuasive and handsome looks. During arguments, he'd often bodily get up in order to emphasize his point of view.

"Why doesn't India leave us alone? They should evacuate their army from our soil. Kashmir belongs to us. Nobody is authorized to play with our lives", Maqbool said.

"When Russia has left Afghanistan; Romania is freed; the whole world has changed, yet India doesn't understand these things." Some others joined the issue and forcefully endorsed Maqbool's words.

"Why do you pose these questions at us? Do you think we are their representatives?" Omkar asked trying to pacify them.

"Of course! I don't know whether you're their agent. But you worked for them. You were part and parcel of those parties who have sold Kashmir to India."

"It wasn't one man's decision; not even a decision of one party. All the people of the State had endorsed this course of action", Kshema said.

While she said these words, there was visible commotion amongst them and angry rebuff by the militants.

"No, No. Don't you say that again. We've heard that argument often. We don't care for what they've done."

"Now, those days are over. We know what we have to do."

The host who was listening quietly so far also joined issue: "Yes, our elders have made mistakes. But, what do you think you are doing about the matter?", he said cautiously.

Before they answered his question, Omkar also added another: "What kind of freedom are you seeking? What do you mean by freedom? I'm also for freedom." For a while the militants seemed to be somewhat bewildered by such direct questioning. However, they collected their wits and managed to speak vaguely on the subject.

"We want India to vacate our land. Then we'll have our own government", Maqbool said.

"Didn't we have our own government? Was anyone from outside the state governing us?" Omkar said.

"Yes, they're thieves and corrupt people. And never has India bothered to look into their misdeeds and understand our terrible plight. We've all along been cheated; not once, but several times."

"Yes, that may be true. Who denies that? But the Constitution provides the people every right to change this system." When Omkar explained this to them, they were rather upset and became emotional.

"Do you want us to believe that they won't rig the elections as they did before? We've no faith in elections now. This democracy of India is all a mockery. It's a great myth to show to the world that democracy exists here", one of them said.

"No democracy now. We have had enough of this. India is an

expert in and champion of 'makarana' (foxy) policy. They may cheat the whole world, but we can't be fooled any longer" added another.

"Now that you've raised so many points, I feel like telling you something, provided you allow me, and you don't mind", Omkar said.

There was some silence in the room and we could perceive that they wanted to keep the conversation going.

"You've got to be absolutely clear about three things. One, what is the concept of India; two, what is the kind of freedom or independence we want; and thirdly how we are going to achieve our objective. I think there is lot of confusion in this regard", Omkar explained.

"There's no confusion. We want independence. Even though, only one militant is left alive, he will get the 'azadi' ", one of them said getting into a frenzy.

"We heard some say that they want Pakistan; others want Islamic brotherhood in the whole world; you say 'azadi'. Who's working for what? Isn't this confusion? As your friends have seen elsewhere, people haven't understood the objectives at all", Kshema informed them.

"We do really want independence. These people are temporarily showing solidarity with Pakistan. If they wouldn't do that, how could militants get the training and the weapons", Maqbool asked looking meaningfully towards Nissar.

"Yes, we're clear in our minds. We'll get all the help from Pakistan and then do whatever we choose to do", Nissar said with a mischievous smile.

"We Kashmiris are really clever! First we ate out India's 'walinj' (heart) and now we are bent upon eating Pakistan's." When Kshema said this in a lighter vein, the atmosphere became relaxed and everyone was laughing.

"That's why Pakistan doesn't trust us. We had to beg them

for the military help they have given us", one of the JKLF militants informed us.

"They don't trust you? What do you mean?" Omkar enquired rather surprised.

"When we are not for them, why should they trust us? Whatever help we got was due to religious brotherhood", another militant said.

"It's not only religious brotherhood. Pakistan wants to annex Kashmir. Otherwise why should they bother so much?"

"Don't think Pakistan is not clever enough. They have made so many groups of militants amongst us. If one group betrays them, there are others which are ready to play their game", Maqbool said.

The host immediately joined the conversation again and informed us rather enthusiastically:

"The day before yesterday three persons crossed over to this side of the border from Pakistan. They have been given an entirely new name i.e. 'Dawat-ul-Harkat'. For this new outfit they've got seven lakh rupees, one walkie-talkie (wireless set) and other guns and ammunition."

"Did they take all the items with them? You should have kept the walkie-talkie. We need it urgently", Nissar asked the host.

"Before I could lay my hands upon that, the MJF (Muslim Janbaz Force) people had already taken the wireless set and rupees two lakhs from those people", the host replied coolly.

"When you're in Pakistan, how are you treated?" Kshema enquired.

"They feed us very nicely. We do get lots of rice and meat; as much as we want. We also get clothing and other essential items. Besides that, we get ten rupees per day per head to cover our expenses on cigarettes", said Feroze.

"The guns and ammunition are given to everyone according to the load he can carry. This is all free of cost."

"We could've got loads of weapons, but alas! The border crossing is such a tedious thing. Sometimes we've to go without food for days together. That's why we value our weapons more than we value our lives", Javed gave the information with obvious satisfaction about their feats.

"You're talking about these weapons in such a way as if you could get lots of these without being checked at the border. Is it so easy to get past unnoticed?", Kshema asked with curiosity.

"It's easy indeed The BSF is in our pockets. We've to grease their palms and they'll allow us to pass without a murmur", Maqbool said.

"Two years ago, the rate was not so high. But now they have raised it quite high", said another.

"Have you paid them?"

"Not only to these people, but also we have to pay to our local guides. Even they've become quite greedy now."

"You won't believe it, we have to pay the BSF on a contract basis for a given period. During this time we can cross with as much ammunition and weapons as we can. It's only a matter of our stamina and courage."

"What about the army?", asked Omkar.

"Army doesn't stoop so low. Their rules and regulations are strict. Besides, they have excellent traditions", the host informed us.

Meanwhile lunch was served to us. By any standards it was a hefty meal, and we wondered how the host could afford to feed so many people. It was an intriguing thought we pondered over. The host's expenses were indeed enormous, and source of his income a mystery. The militants served us with walnuts and apples in between conversations which ensued during the afternoon as well.

We noticed quite a few chess boards lying around in the room. When we enquired from Maqbool about it, we learnt that not only did he play chess himself, but that the other militants

also occasionally spend their leisure in playing this game. Nissar said that he too enjoyed chess and wondered if we were interested in playing with him.

So it went off. For a change, we were playing a game of chess, turn by turn, with Nissar, Maqbool and their colleagues. We found that they were well-versed with the game and proficient too. As the moves were going on, those who were watching the game also became quite interested. For a while, the walls of fear and apprehension, between captors and their hostages, were broken. God's ways are strange indeed!

"You should've been an international chess player. I'm sure you would have won laurels for the country", Kshema said to Maqbool who was indeed very good at the game.

"Don't you know, only those people get a chance here who are somebody's relatives. And who bothers about the villagers?", Maqbool replied.

"Don't tell me that. It's the villagers who have been lording it over us. They ruled the roost all these years", Omkar said.

"For God's sake, please don't harp on the same story again. I don't want to hear about that politics", Javed pleaded in a harassed tone.

But Maqbool, ignoring his pleas, said: "Come on, let him speak."

"Why are you getting irritated? We must think over these matters. Let's forget about the past and bother about what should be done in the future. See, right now, I've moved my 'rukh' to checkmate the King. How's that?", Omkar said while playing.

Maqbool made a brilliant countermove and he as well as his colleagues were thrilled.

"Like this we are going to give India a crushing defeat", one of the militants said excitedly.

"Yes, of course, by killing a few soldiers surreptitiously here

and there: and by harassing innocent people like us", Kshema intervened laughingly.

The host obviously appeared keen to let conversation go on over political issues. He said: "Doctor Sahib, you're right in saying that we should bother about the future. What do you think will be the way out?"

"I've been telling these people; the only way to a solution is through dialogue. Nothing can be achieved by violence. Besides, we must have unity and proper character", Omkar said.

"What do you mean by character?", the host enquired.

"Do you think we don't have character?", Nissar asked.

"You've misunderstood the point. I'll tell you what I mean. We witnessed a minor incident in Germany. One day, on a busy cross road, a milk van turned turtle and splashed a couple of thousand bottles of milk on the road, blocking and jamming the entire traffic. Within seconds, however, all the people from nearby shops and houses jumped out, like honeybees, to the spot with shovels, brooms and buckets. We were watching this scene from our window. Within moments the area was mopped clean and traffic resumed without interruption.

In another instance, which we have witnessed near our residence in Dalgate, a 'tonga' (horse cart) was accidentally thrown into a marshy ditch alongwith the horse. In a jiffy hundreds of people collected around the scene and began to shout: "Pull up the horse's ears. Keep up the ears. Don't allow water to get into them. The horse will die." The poor tongawalla (coachman) was trying his level best to pull out the horse while holding his ears up in the air. But not a single person out of the crowd physically helped him to pull out the tonga and the horse from that ditch. The coachman was finding it impossible to cope with the tragic situation. He was visibly tired, helpless, and bewildered. In desperation he'd to let go the horse who was drowned instantly. The hundreds who were witness to the tragic

incident had not even moved a finger to render some help. Do you see the difference? The Germans did the right thing. That's what I call character. First of all we have to think that this land, this country, is ours. At the moment we are destroying everything and waiting for independence to come. Then you think you can begin building again. Is that what you think freedom is about?" Omkar narrated these anecdotes with surcharged emotion and it seemed to make a dent on his militant listeners.

"Even if we want to develop our state and do some good here, India won't let's do it", one militant said.

"You've been saying so much against India. What is India? Which India are you against? Which territory constitutes the India you hate? Is it Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu or some other state? Which one? Can you name it? Is it Delhi, Madras or Calcutta or Bombay?", Omkar questioned them.

They pondered over the remarks in silence. They didn't respond, not knowing what to say. Omkar continued: "India is a concept. We are a Union of many states come together under the Constitution of India. Those provisions of the Constitution govern the life of every citizen in the states. Together all of us constitute the India we are talking about. The Constitution guarantees us the freedom to determine our destiny in a peaceful manner together with the peoples of other states."

"Yes, yes, we know that. But we don't want to live with India. We Kashmiris want to be free from this. Don't you want freedom?", Maqbool was now strongly making his point.

"Of course, we also want freedom. But even to get such freedom, the only way is to talk over the issues with others. We don't exist in a vacuum. We have a history behind us, which cannot be ignored. And, do you know that Kashmir has not been an independent country for more than five hundred years now?", Omkar explained.

"We'll get back freedom after five hundred years", Nissar

and Javed shouted together.

"You should really concentrate on projecting your leaders for initiating proper talks. Vagueness doesn't help in these matters. Who do you think can achieve this task admirably?", Kshema asked bringing the topic to the realm of immediate reality.

"Shabir Shah is the only untainted one; he is most suitable, has an unblemished record of sacrifices and is not a traitor. He has always taken his stand on principles", Maqbool expressed the unanimous voice of all those present.

"We agree; all other leaders are polluted and we can't trust them", another added.

"We have met a lot of militants by now, but we don't think there is as yet unanimity in your thinking. Under these circumstances, I wonder, how you are going to achieve your objective", Kshema clarified.

"Pakistan is helping us to internationalize the matter. You'll soon see how we get ourselves heard. We are clear about our goal", Maqbool boasted.

"We're depending on crutches. What interest has Pakistan got in our freedom? Do you believe they're really interested in our freedom? They want to annex Kashmir", Kshema said.

"We won't allow this to happen. We're not getting rid of India for joining Pakistan."

"In that case Pakistan has to vacate the area which it has occupied by force, including Gilgit and the areas given by it to China. Do you sincerely believe that Pakistan will give those areas back to us? Why don't you ask them to vacate those parts first?", Kshema asked.

"They'll surely oblige us because they are our religious kin", Nissar said.

"Why didn't they help Iraq during the Gulf war? They didn't want to displease their benefactor. Instead they sent their army to help the Americans. What happened to religious affinity with Iraq

at that time?", Omkar said.

"We didn't approve of Pakistan's stand. But this time they are helping us with weapons. Therefore, we are obliged to them."

"Don't you think Pakistan has cheated and exploited us? Kashmir is in ruins. Thousands of our young people have died. Precious innocent lives have been lost, and lakhs have lost their hearths and homes. In my opinion, I think everybody got jealous of Kashmiris. We were doing well after ages and God knows whose evil eyes have destroyed us", Kshema said with a painful voice.

"Yes! Indeed we have had some evil eye. We had lost our mooring through passion and pride in our achievements. In Pakistan occupied Kashmir there was a lot of pomp and show over the inauguration of a saw mill which they called an industry", the host gave this information reinforcing Kshema's remarks.

"He who does evil to others will never have peace himself. India poked its nose in Sri Lanka and encouraged the LTTE. Look what's happened. We got a bloody nose and lost a great leader in tragic circumstances. Violence always begets only violence", Kshema said.

"When fully convinced of Pakistan's treachery against us, we'll teach them a proper lesson which they'll remember for centuries", Javed said with his usual aplomb. We noticed that our captors, who were essentially pro-Pakistan, were swayed in favour of independence when they encountered this large group of JKLF and other militants. Such transformation in attitudes from place to place was noticed by us in many other situations as well.

Our discussions were long and varied. Different people talked on many subjects. The host left the room to attend to his other guests. The others left too in order to have tea. Javed and Feroze took a nap while we went ahead with our silent meditation.

Thereafter, a tall, bearded gentleman dressed in a newly acquired camel coloured jacket 'kameez' and 'shalwar' came into the room. Without exchanging any greetings with us, he sat in one corner of the room. He scanned the surroundings, his eyes moving around like a video camera, observing each and every object visible in the room, including the two of us. The expression on his face was serious, unpleasant and spiteful. We pretended, however, not to take any notice of him, nor did we feel like beginning any conversation with him. In the bargain, the gentleman became jittery and began fidgetting around with some papers which he took out from his pocket. While he spent a couple of minutes examining these papers, he was trying to compare the contents of each piece of paper. After a while he suddenly got up and caught hold of a book from a solitary shelf near the ceiling of the room. Being the only book visible in the room, we rightly guessed that it was the Holy Quran. He turned some pages and began reading silently therefrom. As he was doing all this we didn't bother him in any way. We could feel from his movements, though, that he was itching for some kind of conversation with us. But that wasn't to be.

After reading the book for a while, he replaced it on the shelf. Before he sat down, suddenly he picked up the chess board and the box of chessmen, which were just lying on the floor. He went back to his seat and began to fiddle with these.

"What was he upto? Is he going to play? Does he want to play a game with us?" We thought in our minds and wondered.

Lo and behold! We were stunned and shocked to see that he was breaking the plastic chessmen in such a way as if he was cutting the throat of his enemy. Presently he was working with his pocket knife as he found that he could not break all the pieces with his bare hands. So he cut these into many bits by the weapon, working with such frenzy that he seemed to be acting like a perverse murderer. As though not satisfied with this act, he

also took up the chess board and broke it into smithereens by striking the plywood board on his knee. Then he got up and threw out of the window all the broken pieces into the compound. After he had finished these violent acts he gave us a sharp victorious look. We could feel that in his heart of hearts he was happy and satisfied with himself. He gave the impression as if he wanted to say, 'I don't care two hoots for anyone. I achieve what I want to.' But something prevented him from uttering such words.

We watched him all the while in utter silence and amazement. He left the room without having been also to strike a conversation with us. We were quite sad watching this episode, and wondered what could have been the motive for his erratic behaviour. Obviously, he was being guided by extremist, fundamentalist ideology, and motivated by over compensation for his low self-esteem.

Later when tea was served to us, Nissar and Maqbool enquired about the chessboard. They probably wanted to play another game.

"Where's our chessboard?"

"See outside from the window. It must be lying there", Kshema replied sarcastically.

"Lying outside. What do you mean?", Nissar said and got up to look outside from the window.

"Who's done it? Why?," asked Maqbool with shock writ large on his face.

"One of your 'mujahideen' has done it", Kshema replied.

"I think he's gone mad. Was he the same person wearing the yellow jacket?", Nissar asked.

"Yes, of course."

Nissar and Maqbool promptly left the room and went downstairs. Meanwhile the others in the room talked about the incident and criticized the man for this action.

Sometime later when Nissar returned back he told us: "I've

given him hell. I minced no words in telling him that he had created a very poor opinion about himself in your minds. I also told him that we could buy ourselves another game. It's not forbidden in Islam. Besides, it's good for training in military strategy."

We spent an uneventful night at this house. Next day in the morning, the same person came back into our room. That day we noticed his looks were subdued. Perhaps he was self-conscious and ashamed about the previous day's act. In fact, he'd come to explain his conduct and started a conversation: "You see, it's prohibited in Islam to play chess. There is no room for these things, be it gambling or music or any other way of amusement. These are prohibited in our religion. For recreation they can play football, wrestling or hockey. That'll keep their bodies fit and trim."

"But this game is not gambling. They were not gambling. Wherever there is no transaction of money there's no harm. It's just a pastime", Kshema said.

"No! No! Chess is prohibited."

"But, that was not the way to teach these youngmen. Discipline should come from within. Besides, you've to teach such things by good conduct and excellent example. So that they copy you, follow your ways. Otherwise they can go to the market and buy another one and play with a vengeance", Kshema told him.

With this argument he seemed to be somewhat chastened, and perhaps the talking done by Nissar the previous day had moulded him appropriately towards a rational outlook. This was evident when he opened up and told us about the Holy Quran and its teachings. While he was talking on the subject, Kshema recited a few verses from the Holy Quran, and said: "There is no difference between the holy scriptures of many religions. The message is the same, one speaks in Sanskrit and the other in Arabic."

He was amazed to hear Kshema's recitations from the Quran and nodded his head in appreciation. Thereafter, he did not venture to speak more on the teachings of the Quran. Instead, he changed the subject and said: "We don't approve of this person either."

"Which person do you mean? Why?", Omkar asked in surprise.

"The owner of the house. We are watching his deeds very keenly and closely. He's on our hit-list", he said very coolly.

"What's he done to be on the hit-list?", Omkar asked.

"His previous conduct. He's played a treacherous role in the past."

"Which group do you belong to? May we know?", asked Omkar.

"I'm in the Hizbul Mujahideen, which is the militant wing of the Jamat-i-Islami", he replied.

"As a brother, I want to ask you a question."

"Yes! Yes! You're free to ask a question", he said.

"Isn't it an un-Islamic act? We're being fed by this man and you say he's on your hit-list? Is this justified and fair?", Kshema asked.

"That's why he has been spared so far. But at the same time we are keeping a careful watch on his actions", he said in a stern voice.

After this dialogue with the person we found him to be reasonable—who looked otherwise different, even rather nasty only because he had chosen to wear a thick mask of fundamentalism over his normal, natural disposition. In the course of his conversation, he revealed to us that his organisation is giving protection to those Kashmiri Pandits who had chosen to stay back in their homes in Kashmir. He also informed us that he personally visited such households to enquire about their well being.

Dar and Sajjad appeared suddenly on the scene again in the

evening, when they arrived with a taxi. Soon we got ready to leave this house. Nissar was asked to stay back and instructed to join us on the following day. We also believed that he would soon be with us. So we didn't say goodbye to him. However, this was their peculiar way of shunting people out of the group. That following day never came for Nissar and we didn't see him again after this moment.

Sajjad and Dar rode the scooter and piloted our taxi. Rapidly we moved out of this area in the dark hours of the evening taking unfamiliar interior roads for our long journey. As usual we prayed and kept our fingers crossed.

Chapter 8

Contradiction

WE criss-crossed through the main streets of Sopore town and also went across one of the bridges over river Jhelum, from the right bank to the left. The market place was quite crowded and lots of people had gathered over the bridge as well. After a brief halt at this end of the bridge, we were allowed to go across, after the militants had exchanged their notes in the usual manner. Thereafter, our taxi raced across and was soon moving on winding and forlorn interior roads of the area. At one place, the taxi halted in a dark lane and a new group of militants met our convoy. Three amongst these militants jumped into our taxi and thereby all of us were squashed. It appeared that one of the militants was our guide for the onward journey. Dar and Sajjad quietly quit from the scene, leaving our group in the hands of these three newcomers. Both of us felt quite uneasy and apprehensive with these new people whom we had never seen before.

The taxi moved on, now without any pilot, over a muddy interior road. Very soon we were in a quandary when the taxi got stuck in mud. The taxi driver was upset and refused to proceed any further. As usual, they took him aside, whispered something to him, whereby his temper was somewhat cooled down. Now the nearby village was alerted in hush hush tones and a few young people from the village were called out to haul the vehicle out of the muddy mess in which it was stuck. With the few kerosene lamps, that were lit by the villagers, we could see that the road was a mud track going ahead towards a hill and was full of curves and zigs besides being full of slush due to recent rains. With lot of

effort and fuss the vehicle was moved ahead but in the process it hit a large rock on the side which smashed its headlight. The driver was disgusted but kept his cool. He had no option, we thought.

As we somehow managed to move on it wasn't long before we met a very severe accident. The car came over a very slippery and narrow path on an uphill track and we were thrown away towards a marshy ditch by the side of the road. Luckily the vehicle hit a couple of large willow trees and was stalled automatically. We had a narrow escape and quickly rushed out of the vehicle. Our nerves were shattered. We pleaded for sending away the vehicle and doing the journey on foot. But our pleadings were of no avail. We walked a few steps ahead and sat down praying and waiting.

One person from amongst the newcomers went along with Feroze to a farmhouse a hundred yards away. We believe they were trying to get room for the night's halt there but perhaps they didn't succeed in getting one. So they brought along a few people to help them to retrieve the vehicle and enable us to proceed with the journey. All the militants and the helpers were now pulling the vehicle back onto the track, very slowly and carefully, in order to avoid its fall into the ditch. The rescue operation took a lot of time and these people were drenched with mud upto their knees. God only knows what kind of motivation sustained them in undertaking such a hazardous and hellish task. We heaved a sigh of relief when the vehicle finally moved onto a slightly better track.

In the darkness, the guide perhaps lost track of the way because very soon we were approaching a main road and could see lot of lights in the distance ahead. Suddenly one of the persons in the new group realized that we were moving straight into the army camp. They went back and spent some more time enquiring about the way from a nearby shopkeeper. Another guide

came along with us for some distance. We had to cross a nallah (stream) in the taxi which now moved over large boulders in the stream because the bridge was damaged. It was very late in the night when we reached the destination after a long hazardous journey of nearly one hundred kilometres.

The taxi halted near an open space with a few chinara trees in sight. Very large houses, which looked like mansions, were seen by us at this site. It didn't look like an ordinary village. We had to wait on the roadside for over half an hour. Somebody from a nearby house was focussing a torch on us from the attic window. One of the militants in our group coughed and angrily shouted: "Put off that torch!"

As soon as these words were uttered by him, the man in the house understood all about us, and quietly put out the light. Meanwhile, the guide, belonging to the new group, came back from inside another house and asked us to follow him. We were taken inside a big hall in the house. The massive house, itself located inside a huge apple orchard, was, by all standards, a well built modern house.

As soon as we sat in the room, the cupboard was opened by the owner thereby bringing into view a large colour TV set. The other gadgets were also placed in other sections of the cupboard. Although the house made us feel comfortable, yet in our heart of hearts, we were somewhat apprehensive because of unfamiliarity with the ways of the fresh lot of our captors. Their appearance was quite awful and we suspected that the worst might yet be in store for us. The leader of the new group was called Peer by his colleagues. Later on, in order to distinguish him from the earlier Peer, Javed and others began to address him as Latram Peer.

Latram Peer was a lean, tall and bearded person in his late thirties. His beard was a typical goatee with hair, long on his chin and sparse on the face. Invariably he wore a black 'pheran' over his 'Khan dress'. His eyes were very narrow and

small which matched his thin and pointed face in a unique way. The first impression made by him was that of a cunning and ruthless person, which was reason enough to unnerve us in dealing with him.

The other militant of the new group was named Ishaq. He was short statured and of a thin build. He also sported a standard beard which was well trimmed and groomed properly. His disposition was serious, conveying the impression that he was a tough guy. He wore a nice denim jacket and trousers, and was fully laced with his gun—with an ammunition pouch tied to his chest—when we first saw him as he had pushed himself into our taxi. He was very tough with Kshema and insisted that she should cover herself fully with the veil. Ishaq was married and was in his twenties.

Nasser was the third person of this group. He was a free and easy, rather a happy-go-lucky person in his early twenties. A very fair and good-looking youngman, Nasser was very fond of Indian film music. He would always fancy himself in the role of many of his heroes in the film world. All the three newcomers were poorly educated and possessed only some familiarity with Urdu.

It was obvious that a lot of inconvenience was caused to our hosts due to our untimely visit at this unearthly hour. They had to prepare tea, cook meals and serve it so late, when probably most people in the house had gone to bed.

Next morning when Kshema went to have a wash, she met an elderly man in the passage of the house. She recollected that she had seen him somewhere in the past. He also seemed to have recognized her as was evident from his surprised look. However, he scrupulously avoided even to wish her lest the militants construe it as an undesirable action. Obviously, he was the owner of the house. We didn't even have a glimpse of him ever again after this encounter. But his sons were serving us and looking after our needs. One of these youngmen was studying for a

Master's degree (M.A.). One of his classmates, who dropped in to see us in the morning, lived in a nearby village. We had an occasion to interact with both these youngmen and talk on a variety of interesting topics.

"Why doesn't India agree to carry out the resolutions of the UN? They have promised to hold a plebiscite in the state", one educated youth asked.

"Do you know what happened in the past? The United Nations appointed a Plebiscite Administrator who could not carry out his task because Pakistan did not withdraw its forces from occupied Kashmir. The administrator waited in Kashmir for six months. Nothing matured and he had to leave", Omkar said.

"But, at that time Mountbatten would have favoured India. He had a soft corner for them. How could Pakistan agree?", asked the other youth.

"You don't have proper information regarding the facts. You say whatever is fed to you through propaganda. And you believe it. Being an educated person you ought to know the facts correctly. This is our tragedy", said Omkar emphasizing the need for dispelling the disinformation.

"Not only once, but I think there was another occasion when the UN representative had been appointed to decide about plebiscite. But Pakistan wanted that Sheikh Abdullah should not be in the picture", Kshema said.

"Yes, because they knew that Sheikh Abdullah was Nehru's friend. What else could Pakistan do?" asked the other youth.

"In the first place, Pakistan itself committed a blunder. We had a standstill agreement with India and Pakistan. In hot haste, Pakistan invaded the state in order to annex it by force. We had no option but to beg for support from India for which accession was essential. This is our history. How can we ignore it?", Kshema added.

"But, now the world history has changed. Look what's

happened to Russia.”

“Russia’s story is different. Before 1941 these three republics were independent, sovereign countries. Russia had annexed these countries in World War II. Besides USSR had a communist dictatorship, which they themselves have replaced by a democratic setup. In India we have a democratic constitution and each state has its own democratic government, chosen by the people themselves”, Omkar clarified the situation.

“We don’t consider accession made by Sheikh Abdullah as valid. He was not our leader. He has betrayed us. At the time of elections they would show a lump of rock salt to the people, giving the impression that the election was an endorsement for Pakistan! (the source of rock salt)”, the youths burst in anger.

“Yes, it’s a fact that some leaders of National Conference used to do these gimmicks on the stage. But, at the same time, I must tell you that people of Kashmir had absolute trust and faith in the correctness of Sheikh Abdullah’s leadership”, Kshema explained.

“There’s no doubt that people were totally devoted to Sheikh Sahib. He’d great spiritual force. Whatever he would say, people would obey it without any question.” A middle aged person, who served tea to us from a ‘samavar’, said joining our conversation. “Why the hell did he talk about plebiscite for twentytwo years? And, then abruptly changed his stance in 1975? Didn’t he cheat the people?” asked one of the educated youths.

“He didn’t cheat people. He was a farsighted person. But 1975, lot of things had happened and he knew quite well their implications. He didn’t want to leave the people in the lurch any longer and deprive them of the benefits of development and progress”, Omkar said defending Sheikh’s role.

“Heavens hadn’t fallen. What changes had taken place?”

“Yes, heavens had fallen. We had yet another war with Pakistan in 1971. The Shimla Agreement had been signed

between the two countries. Do you think that wasn't enough justification for the change?", Omkar asked.

"He shouldn't have bowed before India. He was a traitor", the youth retorted.

"Now you're shouting loud. Where were you when he was alive? At that time everyone followed his lead. Now, you're calling him names after his death." When Kshema said this in anger the villager serving us tea was quite happy to hear these remarks, thereby betraying his unflinching loyalty to late Sheikh Sahib.

"Very soon, all these people will realize what good he has done to the people of Kashmir. He knew well how best the interests of the people would be served. Denouncing him is like spitting at the sky." When he spoke these words all the militants were terribly upset by the praise he showered on Sheikh Abdullah.

"We don't want to hear his name. You shouldn't ever mention it again", one of the militants threatened.

"You people have been mesmerized by Sheikh's name. It's better you get out of this rut", said another militant.

"You're right. These people were so caught up with his name that they thought they will keep winning elections for a hundred years; sometimes sharing Sheikh's cap, sometimes his stick, and sometimes some other things, or even shedding crocodile tears over his cherished memories. They would manoeuvre to show extreme loyalty to him and exploit people on that basis", the educated youth added.

"People are gullible. They don't know the truth", said the other youth.

Kshema wanted to tell them that at present, the militants were exploiting the people but didn't say so just not to offend them.

Omkar was pleased to learn that a barber had been called to the house to give him a haircut, which he needed badly. Later

when the barber had finished with the task in the adjoining room, he began to prepare a hair dye. Omkar got curious and enquired: "What're you doing now?"

"Sir, I'm preparing to dye your hair and beard", the barber replied innocently.

"Dye my hair? Who asked you to do this? I have never done it before. No, No. There is no need to do it", Omkar said forcefully. The barber was in a fix, and in the meanwhile Javed and Ishaq entered the room and said authoritatively: "You've to get this done. These are the orders from the 'ameer'."

"No. I've never done it before. I'm allergic to these dyes. I'll not allow you to do this sort of thing. I'll become terribly ill. Who's going to help me?", Omkar retorted.

They went out to ask Latram Peer about the matter and soon came back to inform the barber that he might go now. The barber was visibly relieved to get out of this tricky situation. Omkar could see his amazement over the fact that anyone at all could take up cudgels with the militants.

When we finally settled in the room again, Omkar asked Ishaq to tune in the BBC or Voice of America on the transistor on which he was listening to some music. Before Ishaq did so, one of the educated youths intervened: "We don't believe in the BBC and VOA news. India has bribed them and gagged them. Their news are contradictory. We have lost faith."

"Let's hear Pakistan news then", another said.

"They're all liars, including Akashvani. We don't trust them. They dish out whatever suits them."

"It's better to listen to news from all quarters. Only then can you know the truth", Kshema clarified.

"Pakistan exaggerates events of this place. This left us in the lurch", Latram Peer added.

"They had promised us something. Now they have gone back on their word", Nassar said.

"What more could they do? Haven't they given us all the weapons? Besides that, they are not in a position to do more", Ishaq said sarcastically.

"Doesn't Pakistan highlight the atrocities of the forces here? All that is true. We are facing terrible ordeals here. Why do you forget this?", Javed said defending Pakistan's role.

"One of our boys was recently interrogated by the CRPF and put to gruesome torture. He was given electric shocks in order to force him to divulge information", Ishaq said.

"Undoubtedly, it's a great tragedy Kashmiris are suffering", Kshema said heaving a sigh.

"Yes, yes, she's right. We have had a terrible record of history. We have been crushed by Dogras and Sikhs in the past", the educated youth commented.

"Why do you forget about the atrocities committed by the Pathan rulers? At that time they massacred lakhs of people. These people were your ancestors, my ancestors, our ancestors", Kshema said pointing towards everyone seated there.

"Yes, of course, we've also heard about this", Ishaq added.

"That's why Zia-ul-Haq was calling us 'Brahman-Zada' (progeny of Brahmans)."

"Aren't you proud of your heritage?", Kshema asked.

"Why are we raking up the past? Let's think about our present condition. We must get our freedom", the educated youth reiterated.

"You talked of history, didn't you? The facts must be fully stated. Educated people have a tremendous responsibility. You should tell these people the truth. Otherwise people are exploited by all sides. No nation can write off its past", Omkar observed, addressing these words particularly to the two educated youths.

The militants left the room to get some cigarettes, while Omkar told these two youths to give the uneducated militants a correct perspective.

"Do you think they'll listen? They are not prepared to argue and discuss issues. Besides they'll kill us for expression of correct opinions", admitted the educated youths.

Kshema went downstairs into the compound. Javed directed Ishaq to go with her and keep an eye over her. When she came back, she was furious and very much agitated. She asked Feroze and Javed who were in the room: "I don't know why you have to breathe down our necks all the time. Is it written anywhere in Islam that if a lady goes out for a moment to ease herself, an armed person will keep standing there to watch? Tell me, is it fair? I felt terribly embarrassed and couldn't even pass out properly. I've already given him hell for his bad manners."

When Ishaq was asked about the matter by the militants he was rather dumbfounded for an answer. He didn't at all look as if he had committed any indiscretion. Later on, we discovered that in the villages people don't attach much significance to such privacies or nuances of urban sophistication.

The same evening we had to pack up and move towards another hideout not very far away, which belonged to one of the two educated youths. The home of this person was rather modest and much smaller than the previous one. It was, however, newly built in the heart of the village. Hiding their heads within their 'pherans' the two educated youths guided and accompanied us to the new place. Every light in the shops and homes was ordered to be put off as we moved along on foot, so that we moved in total darkness unnoticed by the villagers. We stayed here for another night.

A cassette tape recorder was played here for a few hours, and for the first time, we were made to listen to songs specially made in Pakistan for the Kashmiri militants. These were martial songs in Urdu for boosting the morale of these youths. It appeared to us that not everyone was keen to hear these songs but rather, on the other hand, they were very fond of film music like any other

young person in the country. In particular, we noticed that Nassar would stop playing these militant songs abruptly and switch over to cassettes of 'ghazals' and film music. We would also appreciate 'ghazals' and admire Nassar for his choice and good taste for music.

We boarded a taxi for our onward journey towards yet another destination. The vehicle was overloaded with all eight of us. Going uphill, we reached a point where we had to cross a stream, full of boulders, because the bridge nearby was destroyed in a fire. The taxi driver got nervous when he saw the stream, and refused point blank to carry the taxi across the 'nallah'. Latram Peer took him aside; he and his colleagues were pleading with him to take the taxi across. Meanwhile the beaming headlights of a large vehicle were noticed along the uphill road. The vehicle also made considerable noise and the militants were greatly alarmed. They rushed to our taxi and shouted:

"Come out and get going; quick; an army truck is coming up along the road."

"Take your positions for action!", Latram Peer shouted.

"Take Dr. Sahib and Auntie behind that mound", Ishaq directed.

By the time the vehicle approached nearer, we two along with Feroze had gone farther away from the road and began to lie flat behind the mound along the slope of the 'nallah' bank. The militants made hectic moves, cocking their guns simultaneously and shouting commands at each other, while taking positions. Both of us trembled with fear and felt that this is the last moment of our life. The darkness of the night, cocking noises, and the sound of the flowing river, together created such a dreadful scenario in our minds that even 'Yamraj' (the God of Death) would tremble in his pants. As if that noise was not enough, Feroze, who was standing by our side, was shouting on top of his voice: "Javeda! Javeda! Take your position in front of the vehicle."

Lo and behold! In a jiffy the truck was stopped and surrounded by the militants. Thank God! it turned out to be a civilian truck carrying a loadful of maize. Latram Peer and Javed were shouting at the driver and other occupants of the truck: "Hands up! Hands up! Come down quick, all of you."

Instantly ten of them along with the driver alighted from the truck, with their hands raised up, trembling in their 'shilwars' and obeying instructions like robots. The militants kept their guns on their neck and shooed them away, like a herd of cattle, across the river. The driver was directed to stay back.

"Don't you dare open your mouth. Go and wait in the village", Peer told them.

Meanwhile we were ordered to get into the truck. The driver was asked to take us across the river and drive us upto the village. He promptly obeyed these orders. While negotiating the stream, the driver's hands were shaking and we felt sorry for him, indeed sorry for ourselves and the whole lot of us. In between this point and the village, the truck was stopped by gunmen of other militants' groups who were seeking a free ride, as well as showing off their supremacy in the area. Somehow they were persuaded not to insist on their demand.

The truck was suddenly stopped at one point. We got down and then walked a couple of kilometres till we reached a house where we got shelter for the night. This house was quite large and was situated on the banks of a small stream which was passing through its compound. The house belonged to a well-to-do and large joint family of a prosperous farmer.

When we entered the house, Latram Peer introduced us: "They are my uncle and aunty ('masi'). They want to have 'deedar' of Baba Reshi Sahib." It was evident that Peer's explanation was not swallowed by the householder. In fact, we had a feeling that he knew our antecedents.

He remarked: "They may be your 'masi' or 'mesuv'; 'chacha,

chachi', or 'phuphi, pupha' (various types of uncles and aunties) whosoever they may be, they are our honoured guests."

In the true Kashmiri style, notwithstanding it was quite late in the night, we were offered cups of tea before being treated to a proper meal. This was our observation almost in every house. When the householder and his sons were busy in preparation of the meals and we were left alone with the militants, Kshema talked admiringly about the action that had taken place sometime earlier: "It's superb action by you. I've never seen an operation like this before in my life."

"This's nothing. It'd be great thrill to watch the operation with a military vehicle which we'd blow to the skies", Javed said beaming with pride.

"Because of you, we don't venture to have actions en route. That'll put all of us in trouble", Nassar added.

"These actions are part of the game. After all, our life is such that we can have armed encounters frequently. We have left our homes for 'Jehad' for which we have to be ever ready to die", Latram Peer said.

"Yes! 'Jehad'! We have been eager to die but we have to kill ten before we die ourselves", said Javed endorsing Peer's views.

As the householder poured tea for us, he also joined in our conversation.

"Do you know the meaning of 'Jehad'? One has to be a very pious, charactered, disciplined, and a true Musalman. I have heard about the wonderful deeds of Afghan 'Mujahideen'. They have tremendous faith in Allah."

"Well, it's true. Power of God is great. They pray meticulously five times a day. Such is their power that they have destroyed huge tanks with the aid of just a lump of clay", Javed explained.

"Lumps of clay? What do you mean to say?", Omkar asked in utter surprise.

"They chant some prayers to the lumps of clay and throw it on the tank, which is blown into bits. I've seen this with my own eyes", Latram Peer said swearing vehemently.

"Maybe it's so! How can I refute your eyewitness account. I haven't heard that before anyway", Omkar observed having no desire to enter into further arguments.

The owner of this household was a tall middle aged man with a bald pate covered with a typical Kashmiri peasant cap. He was cleanshaven, clever and quickwitted possessing an earthy sense of humour. He introduced himself with gusto and gave details about his life.

"Many years ago a 'faqir' (saint) visited our village. He predicted that I would be the king of my village. With Allah's Grace, the faqir's prediction has come true. I've got everything in my life. We had very little ancestral land. I've added lot more to it. And, you see, this house is always full of guests. All these years 'jattris' (pilgrims) going to Baba Reshi shrine used to halt here for a couple of days. Nowadays, it is 'mujahideen' who are keeping our household busy. Once in a while, we've to cater to the needs of the paramilitary forces as well with tea and snacks. The fire in our 'langar' (large household kitchen) is perpetually burning. There's enough to eat for all. Shukran Allah! (Thank God)." While narrating these details he mentioned that his niece was having some serious problem. She has been chronically ill due to 'Tasruf' (psychopathic condition believed to be caused by a genie).

"We've got her treated by many 'peers' and 'darwaishes (priest, saintly persons, spiritual healers). But she continued to get fits of fainting once in a while. Her condition has been one great cause of our unhappiness. You see, ours is a large joint family. After my father's death, I'm the eldest in the family and have the responsibility of looking after the whole family."

"Why does the 'Tasruf' persist? I've known that once it's sent out by the priest, it never returns back again", asked Feroze.

"How did she get this problem? Has she been caught doing any evil at a shrine?", Ishaq asked.

"I'm told that she might have despoiled a sacred spring near the Pandit's temple", the householder informed us.

We were keenly listening to their conversation and were rather amazed to find the village people still deeply attached to traditional myths and superstitions. The householder waxed eloquent about his personal experience.

For some reason he was rather quite frankly and boldly critical about the working of some militant groups. He mentioned their many wrong doings about which we had earlier heard at some other places. Amazingly, the militants were not offended by such criticism, perhaps because they had become used to hear it from place to place. They seemed to take these things in their stride.

"Dar Sahib, it's quite cold here. May I have a 'kangri' (firepot) to warm my hands and feet?" Kshema requested the owner of the house, whose name we're told was Dar.

"By all means. Why didn't you tell us earlier. I should have thought about it. It's rather cold here. This year the cold has come earlier due to the recent rains", Dar said. Immediately, Dar got up, went to the kitchen downstairs and returned back with a couple of 'kangris' for our use.

Earlier the militants had already provided us with shawls and woollen pull-overs. They had also purchased these items for their own use.

Latram Peer went to have contact with the channel. Ishaq, Nassar had others stayed back with us as our guards. Latram Peer had nominated Feroze as 'ameer' for the day and clearly instructed him not to allow any outsider into the room where we stayed.

"Be alert and careful! As we keep moving in this area the danger of exposure is increasing. Don't allow anyone inside the room, not even from other militant groups", Latram Peer said

with all the force at his command.

Feroze took the instructions with apparent seriousness, feeling quite important, as he became the leader for the day. Javed and Nassar, in the meanwhile, fiddled with their guns.

"I'll keep the LMG ready pointing towards the door", Nassar said, while he actually took the weapon and arranged it so. Javed took up the ammunition pouch and tied it round his chest. He took his gun and went about in full regalia. Ishaq stayed in the room coolly, without making any apparent show of bravado or terrible concern. Once the LMG had been positioned by Nassar he switched on the householder's transistor and heard film music incessantly.

Omkar laid his hands on a book in Urdu *Sabil-e-Rasool*. With its bold print Omkar could read it with the help of flimsy spectacles provided to him by the militants. He found the book quite useful and interesting because it clarified many issues concerning the practice of Islam.

Later that day Feroze and Javed went into the compound for a stroll. Kshema also went for a change and visit to a W.C. While returning into the house, Kshema found an elderly woman of the household sitting on a grass mat in the verandah. Apparently she was basking and warming herself in the beautiful sunshine. Sitting in front of her, Javed was having a good time chatting with her. As the lady noticed Kshema coming in, she signalled to her and said:

"Come here, my dear. It's quite pleasant and warm here. You must be feeling quite cold in the room upstairs."

Kshema could not refuse her kind offer. It was so tempting to be in the sunshine and also to have a glimpse of life through her experienced eyes. Seeing Javed already with her, Kshema didn't hesitate to sit beside the old lady. She found the lady quite charming and graceful, and came to know that she was mother of Dar Sahib. She began her conversation lamenting about the death of her son, who had died only three weeks earlier.

"He was so young, sturdy, and hefty. God took him away in the twinkling of an eye. We didn't know what was ailing him. By the time we could take him to the hospital, he was no more. Believe me, he truly died in my own lap. He has left behind his widow and three children. You see that baby, he's one of them."

While she narrated her tragedy, tears were rolling down her face which she was wiping from her eyes and nose with the sleeve of her 'pheran' (cloak dress). Kshema couldn't find words to console her. At the same time she felt terribly sad.

"Nobody can do anything about Allah's wish. Maybe he was destined to live only for that long."

"People have been telling me that he might have been saved at the hospital. But, his end was ordained. What could they have done? Besides haven't we done our best for him and got him treated by the best of 'peers' and priests. I'm more worried about his children, who are so young. How long am I going to live to protect them from the onslaught of the world?"

"God is Almighty and He takes care of us all. You needn't worry about that. If He has brought them into this world, He will take care of them", Kshema said these words to console the distressed lady.

Javed was getting quite restless and worried at this lengthening chat, and wanted Kshema to cut short the talk and immediately return upstairs.

"O.K. I take leave, mother, and go to my room", Kshema said while making a move.

The old lady couldn't understand why Kshema was in such a hurry to go upstairs. She said to her: "Come on, stay here. Don't you like this beautiful sunshine? Ladies are always comfortable with ladies only. I don't know how you manage to be with these people all the time. Let him go, if he wants to go."

"I've to teach them some lessons" Kshema said with a smile and the old lady believed her with utmost innocence.

Chapter 9

Double Standards

FEROZE had been moving about for quite sometime in the local village and when he finally returned he entered our room accompanied by a stranger. Javed and others didn't approve of Feroze's action in bringing this intruder into the room in gross contravention of the instructions given by Peer.

This youngman was challenged at the door by Ishaq, who searched him, and only then allowed him to enter the room. As he sat down, Feroze introduced him as a militant belonging to the Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) group. He seemed to be impatient to talk to us and rather abruptly began the conversation himself.

"Do you want independence or Pakistan?"

"What do you want?", Omkar asked.

"Obviously, we want Pakistan because we've got Islamic brotherhood."

"Since we don't have Islamic brotherhood with that country, there is no need for us to join Pakistan", Kshema said.

"Then, what are your views? What do you want?", he asked.

"What is the status of your education?" Omkar asked him in order to change the subject.

"I'm a science graduate", he said with a proud flourish.

This youngman who was wearing sunglasses, jacket, and denim jeans was in his twenties. He was a religious fanatic, full of hatred towards other creeds, overzealous, but basically an ignoramus who was only half-baked in his knowledge.

"You haven't answered my question", the youngman said with insistence trying to get some concrete reply.

"Have we to answer your question? For that matter, why

should we break away from one union and join another? What kind of logic is there in doing so?" Omkar put it to him.

"We want Nizam-e-Mustafa (Islamic theocratic state)", he said with excessive vehemence.

"But in our state there are not only Muslims living but people who follow other religions. They too have got a right to express their views. How can these people be adjusted within Nizam-e-Mustafa?"

"Our Quran provides for protection to minorities. There's no problem in that."

"But, why do you want Nizam-e-Mustafa? What are we going to gain out of that?"

"That is God's own Nizam (law). God is the ultimate and only one powerful entity, therefore, His rule alone should govern the world. And these rules are given in the Holy Quran and 'Hadees'. Prophet Mohammed (PBH) is the last prophet."

"That means you believe in a formless God. Of course, we know that", Kshema responded.

"In running a government we don't need to get support from religions. All religions are meant to guide our personal behaviour and conduct. There is in this respect no contradiction amongst various religions. They say identical things about discipline and conduct", Omkar explained to him.

"No, No, I don't agree with you. You worship many gods. Islam believes in one and only one God. How are these identical?", he retorted.

"As I told you, you worship formless God. We worship multifarious manifestations of God. But God is only one, there is no doubt about that", Kshema clarified.

"It seems strange to us that you not only worship male gods, but female gods as well, which is absolutely prohibited in our Islam", said he scornfully.

"What is the difference between a male and female? Their

roles are different but, at the same time, they are of equal importance. One cannot exist without the other. You should know; although you are a male, you are born out of the womb of a female. It is unfortunate that, against all dictates of Islam, you're forcing trivial things down the throats of women. Essentials are forgotten", Kshema said with anger.

"In our Islam women have to be covered from head to toe. Even their nails should not be visible to others."

"What about lady doctors and women who go out to work in the offices, schools, and hospitals? Is it possible for them to follow your rules?", Kshema asked him.

"What can be done? God's law is like that. We have to follow it."

"Is this law only for womenfolk to observe? What about you? Look at your own dress. You're wearing denim jeans and jacket. On top of it you've a shoe worth a thousand rupees. Your foreign sunglasses cost another two thousand. Is this dress prescribed in your Islam? Don't you have to apply these rules and discipline to yourselves? Are you riding a camel and fighting with a sword? Don't tell me these stories. You should know that times have changed." While Kshema said so the others including Dar Sahib looked quite pleased. Our captors were happy because the intruder had been shown his proper place.

"If we agree with your argument, how do you explain the position of great women of Islam who were Imams during holy Prophet's (PBH) time. How could that be possible?", Omkar threw this question at him, while looking meaningfully towards Dar Sahib for support.

"Imamat? No, women never at all. Who has told you that? It's not allowed in our Islam."

"Here you are! It's written in one of these books which I was reading just now", Omkar said this while passing the book to the youngman showing him the page where the facts were clearly

written. Everyone, at that moment, was waiting in suspense for a reply from the youngman. He perused the book and for a while was quite puzzled, not knowing how to respond. Fumbling for words he asked: "Where did you get this book from?" It's not correct", he said feeling embarrassed.

"This is my book. One of you had given me this book to read", Dar explained.

Puzzled, the youngman kept turning the pages of the book, while Dar intervened again: "Things are easier said than done. A true Musalman is one who has command over his religion, and is fully conversant with these holy books. There's no doubt that the holy books of all religions preach the same message."

"Yes, you didn't ask me what 'Nirakar' God (formless God) is? In the holy Quran the very first 'ayat' depicts this very clearly." While she finished saying this, Kshema recited the Quranic verse in the original Arabic and explained the meaning thereof, clarifying the definition of 'Nirakar' God.

As Kshema recited the Quranic verses, the youngman was dumbfounded, and we could feel that the others present in the room were also rather impressed and happy. The youngman did not stretch the Islamic card further, lest he be caught on the wrong foot. Thereupon he sought leave to go.

No sooner had he left the room than there was an argument between Feroze on the one hand and Javed, Nassar, and Ishaq on the other.

"You have made a blunder. You shouldn't have allowed this man to come in. You are exposing us to danger. Latram Peer would be terribly annoyed with you", they said.

"How could I deny a person from HM? You should know, they have arranged this hideout for us. Besides, the householder personally knows this chap. He allowed him to come in", Feroze replied.

While he was talking, he looked at us for support and

continued: "Tell them, haven't I done the correct thing? How could I have stopped him? It would have offended him and put us into trouble."

We nodded our approval to what he was saying. Pleased with himself, Feroze instantly took out a small phial of 'surma' (a fine powder, made from antimony, for applying to eyes) from his pocket and said: "Look, I've got this special 'surma' which is not only good for eyes but it has magical powers."

While he was trying to apply 'surma' to his eyes, Kshema volunteered to help him in doing so. He was visibly moved by this gesture and obeyed like a child. When she had finished with it, Feroze, wanting to show his gratitude, said: "You should also apply it. This is a wonderful medicine for the eyes and keeps them safe from infection. Besides it has got power of magic."

"No thank you. I don't use these things."

Later in the afternoon, the youngman who had visited us in the morning returned back to our house with a large group of HM militants. As they suddenly barged into the room our hearts sank with fear. We apprehended that these armed youth, of another organisation, may overpower our captors, who were less in numbers, and take us away as hostages under their command. This fear was generated by the facts, which we had already heard from the militants, about the transfer of hostages from one group to another under gun point. That eventually could be a real catastrophe as far as we were concerned.

The leader of this new group was hefty looking, middle aged person, wearing a gold embroidered cap of Turkish fez design, matching with his embroidered leather jacket and Khan dress. He sported a well trimmed and luxuriant beard looking every inch a replica of the Afghan Mujahideen. Other members of his group were equally hefty but dressed in different attires typical of the Kashmiri militants. They sat in front of us at different positions in this large room with their weapons held upright in front of them.

From their postures and gestures we apprehended that they were upto some mischief. In fact, our captors were equally nervous. There was pindrop silence in the room which was surcharged with fear. Our worst fear was that the bespectacled gentleman, who had guided them to our hideout, might have carried tales about our discussions with him earlier in the day. We were chanting prayers all the time hoping for the ice to break. Nothing happened!

Suddenly Kshema gathered her wits and said pointing towards the leader: "May we know what's your good name?"

Before the leader replied, his colleague sitting next to him answered: "He's called Chengiz Khan." He looked into our eyes and gave airs as he said these words.

"Yes, the name suits him well. His attire is appropriate according to his name" Kshema remarked with a smile, while she was trembling inside her.

They seemed to be pleased with these words however, and feigned a smile too. The tense atmosphere in the room was unfreezed. Until he spoke, we were not even sure whether the leader of this group was a Kashmiri or otherwise. We were apprehensive that he might be an Afghan.

"What are your views on joining with Pakistan or independence?", the leader of the group finally spoke in fluent Kashmiri removing our doubts about his identity.

"This morning, we've already clarified our position and views to one of your colleagues", Omkar said pointing towards the bespectacled youngman. The youngman wanted to respond to Omkar's remarks but he has prevented from doing so by his leader.

"In that case, why should Pakistan continue to give us aid and ammunition. We are indebted to them for all the help they have been giving. Nevertheless, it is the people of Kashmir who have to decide the issue", Chengiz Khan said forcefully.

“Haven’t the people of Kashmir decided the issues many times before?”, Omkar asked.

“For that matter, lots of things have happened over the years. It’s not possible to rake up issues over and over again”, Kshema added.

“There was another voice of the people which has always been suppressed. They were never given a hearing. You must be knowing that Jamat-i-Islami is the parent body of the HM. I am expressing the opinion of my party”, Chengiz Khan said with some authority giving us the impression that he was one amongst the top ranking leaders of the HM and well-versed with the Jamat politics. He continued: “The people were always misled by the so-called leaders. But now, people have well understood the real situation. They would now like to correctly decide the issues.”

“In that case, you’ll be disappointed because people are talking about ‘azadi’ and not about Pakistan”, Kshema said.

“Of course, we can’t force people against their wishes. They have to be taken into confidence. We are not against ‘azadi’ ”, Chengiz Khan said appearing to be quite reasonable in his approach.

As we talked to him at length we discovered that he was not only an educated person but also knowledgeable about political developments in the State over the last few decades. In passing, he also dropped quite a few names of well known political personalities, with whom he seemed to have rubbed his shoulders.

“Don’t you think that guns are no answer to settle any questions of this kind? If we keep on this path even for a long while, ultimately one has to sit round a table and discuss. You see, what has happened to Afghanistan, Palestine, and Cambodia?”, Omkar said.

By now the tone of conversation had become congenial, and unwittingly the upright weapons in front of us were placed by the militants innocuously on the floor.

"Yes, we do understand that ultimately we have to sort out these issues through discussions. But the guns have helped us to make ourselves heard. Nobody would otherwise have heeded our voice," Chengiz Khan said.

"What do you think should be the agenda for such discussions, if at all held?" Omkar asked pointedly to elicit views of the HM organisation.

"We want to go by the resolutions of the United Nations and insist on the right of self-determination for the people. That's our stand", Chengiz Khan said.

"What do we do with the intervening developments? We might, in that case, have to make an appeal to God Almighty to bring back alive Sheikh Abdullah, Maharaja Hari Singh, Nehru, Jinnah and many others. People may even want to do away with the partition of the country", Omkar posed the question in response to what Chengiz Khan had observed. Chengiz Khan gave a meaningful smile while Omkar added: "Besides all these issues, we have the Shimla Agreement of 1972."

"I would like to know what this much talked about Shimla Agreement is all about?" Chengiz Khan enquired from Kshema, adding: "You must be knowing fully about it."

"The Shimla Agreement stipulates that all matters and pending issues between the two countries — India and Pakistan — shall be sorted out through bilateral discussions. Besides, it is clearly understood that they have mutually agreed not to disturb the Line of Actual Control in the Jammu and Kashmir State."

As Kshema said this, we could clearly see the sadness on his face. His younger colleague again wanted to poke his nose and say something which the leader didn't allow. He silenced him.

"What about Kashmiris? Aren't they anywhere in the picture? This is a great irony!", he said.

"True, well, you have a point. But don't you think this should have been taken up at that time?", asked Omkar.

“Let’s forget about the agenda for a while. If the talks are held, who do you think would be the best representatives of the people?”, Kshema asked seeking to widen the scope of the conversation.

“There are Mr. Geelani and so many others.”

“What about Shabir Shah? We have found that many people are talking highly about his political role. I think Googa Sahib should also be one of the leaders on the panel”, Kshema said this on the basis of the information given by our captors who had been talking about these personalities.

“No, No, Not at all. Shabir Shah is not the people’s representative. Only those persons will be chosen in whom people repose complete trust”, he replied.

“Who, for instance, do you think are those people?”, Omkar asked. He named a few persons including Abdul Ghani Lone in this category.

“Abdul Ghani Lone! What criteria do you have in choosing the representatives?”, Kshema queried with some amazement.

“No, Sir, No Sir, Lone is not amongst those people. We want only those persons who possess an unblemished political record”, a young militant colleague retorted from behind. Chengiz Khan did not continue with the subject. Changing the topic he asked Kshema: “What do you think if BJP forms a government at the Centre?” Before Kshema could respond, another militant from behind observed: “A BJP government may prove to be better than the Congress government we’re having. They’ll look after our interests better. We know when Atal Behari Vajpayee was foreign minister, India had the best relations with Pakistan.”

“India is a secular State. Any government which comes to power has to act accordingly. No government can afford to be non-secular. It’ll not last a single day”, Omkar said.

“Yes, it’s true. I agree. See what happened in Pakistan. The Islami Jamhoori Itehad government has not been able to oblige

Jamat-i-Islami. The government's stance is different", one of the militants observed.

"May I ask you one question? What is the BJP view on politics? It's quite confusing", Chengiz Khan asked.

"As far as we know, all Indians have to behave like Indians. That's what they say. Perhaps they want every Indian to be staunch nationalists having no other over-riding loyalties", Omkar explained.

"In Kashmir, BJP has meddled too much. Jagmohan, at the behest of BJP forced out Kashmiri Pandits from the valley", Chengiz Khan said, bringing up the topic yet again for the umpteenth time. We repeated the explanations given earlier refuting at the same time his statement, while Kshema added further: "No Kashmiri Pandit has moved out from the valley at the behest of the Governor. I'll give you some instances where Muslims asked their very close and dear Hindu friends to quit their homes. The Muslim friends feared that there may be murderous attacks on the Hindus. In many cases, trucks were procured by Muslim friends and neighbours for the evacuation of Hindus. Besides, they helped some Hindus in packing their belongings as well. In fact, the keys of the home and some belongings were kept in the hands of Muslim friends", Kshema said with emotion.

"This may be the case in the city. But, why did the Pandits leave the villages?", asked the bespectacled young militant.

"Don't tell me that. Only a few days back we were in Deedarpur. The householder told us that shops and homes of Pandits were burnt down. Where do you think they would have stayed in? Besides, don't you remember the constant warnings given to Kashmiri Pandits in the local newspapers asking them to quit the valley forthwith? When all is said and done, it seems that their forced exodus was carried out according to a well thought out plan. Okay, forget that. Take our case. We stayed back here.

Look at our fate”, Kshema said angrily with tears in her eyes.

“Yes, kidnapping is prohibited in Islam. We condemn this act. Our organisation has not done any such kidnapping”, Chengiz Khan said. We were somewhat surprised by this statement of his, and Omkar asked him with curiosity: “But, how about many people HM has also kidnapped?”

“Those people, you must see, are from the forces. Such are the only hostages which are approved of in a ‘Jehad’. Besides we have not carried out any criminal murders. Since Hizbullah is akin to our organisation, they’ll release you unharmed and with honour, even if government fails to have negotiations with them”, Chengiz Khan replied enthusiastically.

The householder had made elaborate tea and Kashmiri home made ‘roti’ in order to entertain the extra guests. The host showed special concern and courtesy to them, and strangely, Chengiz Khan was trying his best all the time to impress upon us his decency and consideration by himself playing host to us zealously.

As soon as the HM group of militants took leave of us, Javed and his colleagues sat beside Kshema and earnestly enquired: “If we so desire, would you accept to become our leader?”

“Leader? But why?”

“You can collect the people for us. You talk so persuasively and mould them towards you.”

“Oh! I see. For that purpose you want me to become your leader! I won’t be your leader. But both of us can be your advisors. Dr. Sahib will be your educational advisor and I’ll give you political guidance”, Kshema said this in a lighter vein.

“In that case, you’ve to learn how to use the gun”, Javed said.

“You tell me; I can do without the gun and help you.”

“Without a gun you can’t do our work. We’ll pay you for that.”

“What is happening to you? Didn’t you hear what all we

have been talking about? The gun is no solution for any problem. You remember that", Omkar silenced them with these words.

It was time for 'Namaz' (prayers). All the militants got ready for joint prayers after usual ablutions etc. We also sat in silence for our meditation, which had become our daily routine. We were not aware as to when Feroze had finished his prayers, and sneaked out of the room. But after a couple of hours, he returned back beaming with considerable excitement. He sat beside us: "I've chased him out. Nobody could so far accomplish that task", Feroze said.

"Chased whom? HM militant?"

"No, No, that girl's 'tasruf' (demon). I'm just now coming from her room." When Feroze uttered these words all other militants came closer and huddled round him listening intently.

"How could you chase him out?" Do you've any knowledge of this art?" Ishaq and Nassar asked him in one surprised voice.

"I did it with my gun. I've heard that 'tasruf' (demon) is scared of iron", Feroze replied.

"I don't know why you've to poke your nose in these family affairs. You are going to land us in trouble", Javed said peevishly with anger apparent in his voice.

"Is it wrong to help someone and get them out of the mess? How can I change my nature. Besides, I've done a good work", Feroze justified his action.

"Javed, you better keep quiet. Let him finish what he's to say about it." We silenced him. Our remarks emboldened Feroze who continued: "Mind you! I'm your 'ameer' today. You've to obey my orders." Omkar pacified them both before tempers would run high, and said: "Now tell us what happened."

"All the ladies were sitting around the sick girl. They were beating the girl with brooms in order to shoo away the genie. They had burnt incense in the 'kangri' (fire pot) producing a lot of smoke. As I entered the room with my gun, the ladies made way

for me and explained what they were doing.

Immediately thereafter, I took over, to achieve the task myself," Feroze said excitedly.

"Are you sure she had 'tasruf'? She may be ailing from some disease?" Omkar questioned him.

"Yes, the owner of the house told us that the girl is suffering for a couple of years from this problem", Nassar informed.

"She gets fainting fits once in a while, and talks incoherently. These are the typical symptoms of 'tasruf'. In the villages such cases are quite common", Ishaq added by way of support to Nassar.

"What happened after you took over charge?" Kshema asked curiously.

I showed him the gun and told him to leave. "If you won't leave, I'll shoot you."

"Who're you to shoot me? Don't scare me with these words. The genie said to me", Feroze said.

"Where was the genie?", Kshema asked with curiosity being somewhat confused about the whole situation.

"The genie spoke through the girl's mouth. She uttered these words", Feroze clarified, and continued: "The genie is a Kashmiri Pandit".

"What?"

"Of course, I swear! He's Kashmiri Pandit", Feroze said swearing by the holy Quran.

"How do you know, he's Kashmiri Pandit?" Omkar asked.

"He told me that he lives in a cremation ground and also he greeted me with a 'Namaskar'. Now he has promised me that he'll never again return to her", Feroze said with total innocent conviction.

"They do promise but they don't keep their promises. These are, after all, devils", said Ishaq cynically.

"Be careful, Feroze. Now the 'tasruf' might take on you", Javed warned him while narrating and explaining how these devils can take revenge on those who disturb them.

"No, No. He wouldn't dare to come to me because I've the gun."

The evening was wearing out and it was getting rather late. The militants were worried about the absence of Latram Peer for so long.

"I don't know why Latram hasn't come so far. Hope, he hasn't got into some trouble on the way", Nassar said.

"Why do you call him Latram? Latram is not a good name for a nice person like Peer Sahib. Latram is a notorious name", Kshema asked.

"You don't know how courageous Peer Sahib is, just like Latram, the great", Javed explained.

"What's so great about him?" asked Ishaq.

"When Latram shoots bullets from his gun, it makes an enormous noise with sounds like Lat. . . r . . a . . m!. L . . a . . t . . . r a m! L . . . a t . . . r . . . a m! till it reaches the enemies' camp and kills several at a time. Even CRPF is mortally afraid of Latram's bullets. He is a courageous dare devil", Javed said fantasizing about his deeds.

We are reminded about a conversation earlier brought up by Nassar in one of the hideouts.

"You see, Mushtaq Latram had sent a couple of his comrades for collecting money from a very rich business man. But the business man had refused to pay up, because he was not sure whether they were genuinely sent by Mushtaq Latram. Next day, Latram went personally to the business man and asked for a payment of rupees twenty lakhs from him. On hearing this demand, the business man almost fainted and began to plead for some mercy. Latram didn't budge from his initial demand; instead he asked one of his colleagues to take out a tape and measure the

feet of the business man's only son. Surprised on seeing the tape, the business man trembled and asked nervously: "Why are you going to measure his feet?"

"To get the right size of shoe for him, so that we can take him across the borders", Latram had explained.

Hearing these words, the business man had nearly collapsed and said: "I've got only one son. Please spare him from the ordeal."

At this juncture Latram had coolly told this business man: "Do you think that rupees twenty lakhs is too big a sum in lieu of your son?" Having uttered these words Latram had instantly left the house putting the ball squarely in the business man's court.

"Did he ultimately pay up?" Omkar asked wanting to know more about these gruesome events.

"The business man then rushed to Googa Sahib and begged him to intervene in the matter to get the amount of ransom money reduced. With his intervention, the reduced amount was eventually paid up by the business man."

While narrating this incident Nassar had praised Mushtaq Latram for his courage and the manner in which he dealt with people. All the militants seemed to be pleased with the thought that people were scared of him and, therefore, wanted to imitate him. They would emphasize the fact that Latram gets things done the way he wants them to be. He does what he says.

In the meantime, Latram Peer had returned back and was now sharing his day's exploits with his colleagues. He had made contact with his channel earlier in the day. Later he had paid a visit to his home to arrange for the harvesting of his crops etc. He was lamenting over the delay in doing these tasks.

"Aunty! You won't believe me, how much my home front is suffering. I've not been able to attend to my tasks. God alone can help me", Peer said.

"Why don't you tell your leaders to release us immediately.

You would also be free. We really feel sorry for you", Omkar said.

"I've been telling you that you have wrongly chosen us. You won't get anything in exchange for us. We don't count much with the government", Kshema added.

"How I wish, I could decide this matter myself. I'd let you go. We would also be free of this irksome task. Do you know how difficult it's for us to keep you moving in this manner? These governors of ours don't understand how difficult it's to arrange the hideouts in the field. Field operations are different and more difficult than sitting on the sofas and ordering people around. Our governors (referring to his bosses) are no less arrogant than Governor Saxena. These people are talking through their hats", Peer said helplessly giving vent to his mood of frustration uninhibitedly.

"We can't even run away like the Swedish engineers did", Omkar said.

"They didn't run away. Their captors let them go. They had connived with them", Peer explained.

"Really? Is that so?", Omkar asked.

"Yes. It's true. The militants are still facing severe interrogation by their organisation over this issue."

"We also feel quite bad about you, because you've to face lot of difficulty and hardship on account of us", Kshema said with empathy.

Peer was obviously pleased with these remarks.

"Rest assured, Aunty, my 'ameer' will not, God forbid, order me to do any harm to you. But even if he orders me to execute you, I'll never obey it. I'll risk my life on that", Peer said with lot of emotion and further added: "I've felt strongly that you're God-fearing good people. Allah is surely with you."

As we came to know more about Latram Peer, we found that his external appearance belied his good nature deep down in his

heart, which flowered into a fragrant interaction with us as the days went on.

His communication with us had a unique character of its own. Often when he returned from his day's visit to his 'channel' which involved walking long distances—he would enter the room silently without uttering a single word or greeting anyone. Instantly he would release a few old newspapers from his armpit and throw them on the floor near us. Then he would drop himself loglike onto a bolster, lie down flat crossing his legs, and maintaining a serious countenance all the time. Thereupon he would take out a dozen packets of cigarettes of different brands and throw them like toffees towards each of the militants giving them their ration of cigarettes for the day. While this gesture would cause excitement among the militants, it would also give immense pleasure to Peer Sahib while perceiving himself in the role of a benevolent 'ameer'.

This scenario, although interesting, did not particularly amuse us, because we were dying to hear the latest news, about our fate, from his organisation. The newspapers were usually silent about the matter. The radio broadcasts had also stopped giving any news about us. This was so while the government had already taken a tough stance having decided not to release any militants in exchange for the release of hostages. Such developments scared us spreading gloom and fear over our minds. Naturally, we would be terribly keen to ask him pertinent questions about our future, but we didn't do so because we had by now understood that Peer opened up rather gradually on his own. Noticing that Peer was quite tired, Kshema directed the militants: "Peer Sahib is so tired. You're only bothered about your quota of cigarettes. Get up and press his feet."

Ishaq and Javed obeyed her orders and began to press Peer's legs.

"No, No. I don't need it. I'll prefer to be left on my own."

While Peer said so, he let it be seen that he was pleased with the situation and was only being rather modest. Slowly as he felt relaxed he would himself open up. While puffing happily at a cigarette he would then be in the right frame to answer our queries.

"Peer Sahib, is there any progress in the negotiations for our release?"

"Government is a bastard. They're playing a very dirty game, changing their stances now and then. They seem to be least interested in talks", Peer said in disgust.

Our faces fell, as we heard his remarks. We were worried and the anxiety about our future was writ large on our faces.

"They'll have to conduct negotiations. When they exchanged people in other cases, how come, they won't do it now?", Javed observed.

"We're not important persons. Who'd bother about us? We've been telling you so from the beginning."

"That's why we don't want to be with India. Do you understand now how they treat Kashmiris?" Nassar said very seriously.

"But they have exchanged militants on earlier occasions in Nahida's case and that of Mufti's daughter. Why not now?", Ishaq questioned with eagerness.

"Those cases involved daughters of very important persons, we've no such clout."

"I've been telling you the government has got double standards. Don't worry. Leave it to Allah", Peer said reassuringly.

Chapter 10

When is 'Navratra'?

HAVING spent two nights in the Dar household there was no chance for us to stay here for yet another. Particularly, after the encounter with a large group of HM militants, the whole village was reported to be all agog for mischief about us. Feroze and Peer were quite cross with each other over this issue, which resulted in dropping out of Feroze from the team at this juncture. He stayed put in Dar's house while we were ordered to move on. We didn't meet Feroze again thereafter.

By now we had become familiar with their tactics, and although Feroze promised to see us next day, yet we knew he wouldn't be able to keep his promise. All the time, however, we felt that Feroze was keen to stay on with us until we would be released. Such was the painful drama going on with us and the militants.

As we began to move from this place in the late evening after finishing our meals, all the people from the large household came out in the compound to see us off. Everyone's eyes were moist with tears. The old matronly lady was deeply moved when she hugged Kshema and said: "Allah will protect you. I make the offerings of my body, my heart, and everything, to you with love (Balai Lagay; Ratchhafi Lagay, Zoov wandai). Don't worry. God will protect you."

Kshema was deeply touched while she hugged all the ladies of the household one by one. We also observed that Javed had developed a deep rapport with the old lady, who gave him the love of a dear grandmother, the like of which he had probably never received before. She kissed Javed profusely and blessed him with kind words of love in typical Kashmiri as she did with

Kshema. We could well observe the wrench on Javed's face.

Feroze shook hands with us and embraced Omkar. His eyes too were full of tears. Although he kept saying that he will soon meet us, yet perhaps because he had already perceived the truth about his future role, he was genuinely feeling sad to miss our company.

We left the house through a backdoor in the compound which took us straight on to dense paddy fields ready for harvesting. Guided by two persons from the household and a couple of militants, we walked over the field boundaries—which were uneven and undulating, being situated on the banks of a river in a mountainous terrain. The sky was clear, starry bright but otherwise it was pitch dark. We could not use any torchlights and it was difficult even to see our own hands clearly in the darkness. Peer directed the militants and our guides to hold our hands and carefully lead us over the path, lest we stumble into a ditch and get hurt. After traversing a long distance, we had to cross a wide stretch of a gushing stream with water flowing over huge boulders.

Peer ordered that both of us be carried across piggyback. Omkar flatly turned down the offer, took off his shoes and waded carefully across the stream. But Kshema had to obey since she had no other option. While she was being carried across by one of the militants, his foot slipped on a slippery boulder and both of them fell into the gushing stream. Omkar and others felt that Kshema might have been badly hurt or fractured her bone. So they rushed towards her to help them by lifting her from the river bed. Kshema was drenched from head to toe. "Are you okay? Did you get hurt? My God! you are drenched. What hell!" Omkar said to Kshema trying to see if she was able to move freely.

"Aunty! How are you feeling? Hope you're not hurt?" Two of the militants gave her a helping hand to lift her up.

"No, No. Thank God! I think I'm not hurt. Goodness gracious! I felt as if somebody was holding me up while I fell

down. But, I'm drenched all over. I really don't know how it all happened", Kshema said, while she tried to get into shape again and continue with the crossing. She was again carried piggyback thereby drenching the militant's clothes as well.

It took us quite sometime to rinse her clothes after we had crossed to the other bank of the river. Peer and Nassar went for the recy, leaving behind all of us on a hill slope. The weather was freezing cold. On top of it, Kshema's wet clothes gave her a biting chill piercing every part of her body down to the bone marrow. Her teeth were chattering and her whole body shivering with cold. It took Peer and Nassar a long time to return. Javed and Ishaq were nervous and chain smoking all the while. Our bladders needed to be emptied frequently. Finally, when they again appeared on the scene, and ordered us to make a move, Kshema discovered to our utter dismay that she couldn't get up because her legs had frozen like icicles. Omkar helped her to drag along until at long last, after half an hour's walk down the road, we reached our destination for the night's stay.

The room, in which we were lodged, was very dark and nothing much was clearly visible. While moving about in this blind alley we felt that there were some chairs and a table in the room. Meanwhile someone came with a few candles in his hand and lit them for us. Everything in the room became visible now. As our eyes moved around, we found to our total disbelief a couple of calendars which depicted the pictures of Lord Shiva and goddess Durga hanging on the walls.

"Kapai house!" Omkar whispered to Kshema. (Kapai was our short form for Kashmiri Pandit, KP for short).

"Yes" Kshema replied as she too had observed the pictures. The room had not been tidied up and we thought that the owners might have earlier left the valley.

Kshema changed into a fresh set of clothes which were carried in our baggage. Tea was served to us by the owner of the

house and he also provided us with 'kangris' (fire pots). These were most welcome to all of us. Kshema was also given medicine to mitigate her cold.

Next morning, when we woke up and went about our daily chores outside the room, we noticed a couple of Kashmiri Pandit ladies, clad in sarees, washing pots and pans on the banks of a small stream which was flowing by the window of our room. The water in the stream was crystal clear and serene. Seeing this, our hearts were greatly saddened. We didn't know why. The overall scenario looked forlorn and morose which might have seemed so partly due to our own gloomy mental plight.

Later, when Kshema went out to have a wash near the stream, she found a number of eyes peering at her, curiously watching every movement of hers, while scanning her from tip to toe like an X-ray machine. There was total silence and even their conversation was halted for a while. Kshema felt a peculiar uneasiness around her. She wanted to break the impasse. "See how beautiful and clear water you've in the villages. We don't have such luxuries in the city." These words were a Godsend for the ladies who were busy with their daily chores. Feeling delighted they wanted to continue the conversation. "But then, everything in the villages is not good. Villages are half-baked; whereas you've all the amenities in the city" one lady remarked. "If a person falls sick here in the village we've to carry him a long way in order to get him even minor medical aid. For major medical problems, we've nowhere else to go except the large cities", another lady said.

All of a sudden, Javed came out of the room and found Kshema chatting with the ladies. Immediately he signalled her to get back into the room. In the meantime Peer had already gone on his usual errand of contacting the channel.

Omkar was feeling quite stuffy inside the room. He opened the window to get some fresh air. Right across the stream he saw

an old lady, attired in a typical Kashmiri Hindu dress, moving around in the compound with the help of a walking stick. She wore a round and well groomed head dress with a long pony tail hanging down from her head dress upto her toes. Around her waist she had tied a colourful waistband which divided her long cloak gracefully into two halves. As she strolled, he could clearly see two golden ornaments hanging from her ears upto her breasts. It was a delight to see a living human being in this rapidly vanishing traditional and graceful Kashmiri attire. Whereas, being rather old she was merely basking in the sunshine, the younger lady of the household was taking out dung from the cowshed and spreading it to dry on the ground. Life seemed to be going on in the villages, without a break, at its normal leisurely pace. Nonetheless, there was an inexplicable distress quite evident on the faces of the womenfolk working in the village.

Omkar's chain of thoughts was suddenly broken when a middle aged lady entered the room and poured out a substantial quantity of fresh and juicy pears from the 'pallu' (loose end of garment) of her 'saree' (main garment of Hindu women).

"You must be hungry. I plucked these for you from our own garden. I'll send you some walnuts as well", the lady said to us in a hospitable tone.

"Thank you so much. These are really welcome. So far we have had only lot of apples. This is a good change for us", Kshema said.

"These are not more precious than you are. Ask for more, and I'll get it", she said.

The lady was quite happy to hear Kshema's words and we felt that she had understood about our identity. We were not sure though.

Javed, Nassar and Ishaq were getting restless due to hunger. Unlike our experience in other homes, we didn't notice any activity within the household for preparing and serving lunch to us.

“Aren't we going to get any lunch today? What's going on here? We are hungry”, Nassarullah said rather irritated by hunger.

“Latram must already have ordered them to prepare food for us. He's our 'ameer' and he alone knows them well”, Javed clarified.

“There's no harm if you go and enquire from them about it. Maybe, they haven't been told anything by him.” Kshema was asking them to take some initiative in the matter.

“We can easily do without our meals. But since you're younger you will suffer much. Go and find out”, Omkar asked Javed to act.

Javed went to the main house and to his utter amazement discovered that the kitchen was absolutely cold. The family have had their lunch and were busy with other chores. When Javed enquired about our meals, they felt quite embarrassed. Without asking any further questions, they got down to prepare food for us.

Amazingly, the food was cooked in just an hour's time and was absolutely delicious. All of us relished this meal heartily. The militants were all praise for the well cooked, tasty meal.

As usual, we were to leave this house in the evening. But the owner of the house was very keen to serve us a proper meal. He was feeling somewhat uneasy because he felt that they had not served us well for lunch. He had also requested Peer Sahib to permit the ladies of the house to personally serve the meals to us, which he allowed. As evening approached our host and his relative got busy in arranging to lay our meals. In the meanwhile, a young lady of the household came and sat beside Kshema. She was one amongst those ladies whom Kshema had briefly talked to in the morning. It didn't take us much time to find out that she was a daughter-in-law of the house. She was fair-complexioned and quite pretty. She wore a large red 'bindi' on her forehead distinctly pronouncing her identity as a Kashmiri Pandit. Besides

being beautiful, she was also quite brave and courageous which made a deep impression on us.

“Why didn’t you tell us to prepare meals for them in the morning? It’s due to your negligence that these people had to have meals so late”, she asked Peer pointedly.

Peer was a little pleased with these words and he hung down his head pretending to be apologetic. Encouraged by Peer’s response the young lady continued: “You’re my brother. You shouldn’t have hesitated. You know Ahsan Dar comes here quite often. He’s my brother. He never hesitates to ask anything whatsoever.”

Peer smiled and promised her that they would trouble her again some other time. Meanwhile, meals were served to both of us in this house, while others had to wait because meals for them had been arranged by another host in a nearby hideout.

While we were eating our meals, Omkar asked the owner of the house: “When is ‘Diwali’? Could you please tell us about the dates of ‘Navratra’ and ‘Dussehra’? We’ve lost all track of the lunar calendar.”

“Diwali is still far off. It’ll be sometime in November. But ‘Dussehra’ is in the third week of October”, the host replied.

“I’m praying to God that we should be released soon. We would then celebrate our religious days properly”, Kshema said to Peer in an earnest tone.

“Insha Allah! You’ll be released honourably and we too shall have our leaders and colleagues back with us”, Peer said hopefully.

“Five days from now on will be the first ‘Navratra’ and ‘Ashtami’ will be on Wednesday”, the host said.

“But how come? Wednesday will be ‘Navmi’ (9th day)”, Kshema said counting the days on her fingers.

“That’s because there are two ‘Shashtis’ (sixth days)”, he clarified.

"What do you have to do during these days?" Ishaq enquired wondering why we were making all the fuss about these days.

"It's because we have to observe fast. Besides, we don't have to eat meat during the period", Kshema replied.

"Why do you have to keep fast?", Nassar asked.

"It's just like your 'rozdari' (fast in the Muslim month of Ramdhan). We've to follow the regimen strictly", the host told the militants.

"Well, there's no problem. They can follow their practices", Peer said.

"It isn't so easy to follow the rituals when you're not in your own house. There are many small things which can't be observed outside our home. Besides, it isn't possible to have proper 'pooja' (prayers)." The host elaborated in an attempt to vigorously plead our case for immediate release.

We'd finished eating our meal and were now getting ready to move out. The elder lady of the house also entered the room at this time and joined others to bid goodbye to us. As we stood near the door, the pretty young lady stood up, held Peer's beard in her hand, and earnestly pleaded: "You're my brother, Aren't you? Promise me, please, that no harm shall come to these people. I'll hold you responsible. Give me your hand (your promise); only then shall I let you go."

Peer was rather helpless, so he could only nod his head in affirmation. At the same time, we observed that his face was radiant with joy and he was gloating over newly found clout. He gave her his hand!

We took leave, shaking hands with the host. Kshema hugged the ladies who were sobbing. Tears rolled down their cheeks. Kshema too was in tears.

We left this home with a very sad heart feeling a strange kind of pain. In that mood we walked through dark and labyrinthine lanes to another house some distance away. Although this house

was more richly decorated with ornamental work inside we felt a strange negativity here. We got the feeling that we were inside a mausoleum. Somehow we passed a restless night here.

Next morning we felt a little better as we discovered that the house had a neat little garden attached with it, where lovely autumn flowers were blossoming in plenty. This being a rare sight in the villages of Kashmir, we felt a strange happiness and relief within us.

Turn by turn, we went into the compound for W.C. and a brief stroll. The militants were in no mood to grant us this freedom because they felt the place was much exposed.

The whole day long we were longing to leave this place for another. But to our utter disappointment, we were in for a raw deal. Our blood froze as we saw a 'reda' (horse cart) on the road waiting to carry us for the onward journey. This 'reda' was perhaps used for the whole day for carrying apple boxes. It became immediately apparent to us that the horse was very reluctant to undertake the journey. It was very dark, cold, and late in the night. Besides, the horse was too tired. It was a Herculean task for the coachman and the militants to coax the horse to move. The animal, however, was terribly obstinate and it moved only at a snail's pace. the horse was mercilessly whipped, lashed and swore at by the coachman and the militants, being punished, as it were, for his fault. The militants were all the time fearing an encounter with the police force and were therefore anxious to quickly reach the destination.

We squatted inside the cart which had neither seats nor any cushion over the hard planks. However, a cotton sheet was spread over the planks to lend the ride some respectability. All the while we offered our prayers.

The journey was most of the time uphill with the cart actually leaning backwards, making the journey over the rough macadam road very uncomfortable. The coachman alongwith three militants

were together running on the road alongside the horse, and the other three were sitting with us with their guns battle ready as usual.

On the way a lonely man in a black 'pheran' encountered us. The militants got alerted and went straightaway to interrogate him. When they came back, they said he was a local villager and seemed to be an innocent passer-by.

While the 'reda' was moving ahead on a hilly stretch of the curved road, all of a sudden, the horse stopped and began to move backwards in a dangerous act of defiance nearly throwing us all deep down the hill. Our hearts throbbed with fear which chilled our senses. We shouted to the militants to prevent the accident. They laboured hard with the horse and the wheels, trying to hold back the vehicle from catastrophe. Luckily, they succeeded in doing so and we thanked God for His mercy.

Thereupon, we made a suggestion to the militants: "We'll walk the distance. Never mind. It's better to walk than to face this ordeal."

"Don't worry. There shall be no problem. It's not very far from here. The coachman will manage better, now that we are going downhill", Peer reassured us.

Peer and Nassar went inside a large house for a recy. On the hill slope, there was this neat and clean house. We thanked our stars that after a fateful and tiresome journey we were in a reasonably comfortable and clean place. Immediately on our arrival we were served tea. Pressing his own legs Nassarullah said: "Is anybody having a tablet of 'zangpol' ('zang' means leg in Kashmiri). My legs are aching severely due to the running we've done."

"What is 'zangpol'? I haven't heard about that medicine before?", Kshema asked.

"You know, 'calpol' ('cala' means head in Kashmiri) is medicine for headache. Naturally medicine for leg-ache should be

‘zangpol’, Nassar said somewhat mischievously. Everybody laughed at his explanation, while he went on with the saga.

“Aunty, you must be knowing so and so MLA. Once he stayed in a hotel during a tour. Early morning the waiter asked him: ‘How about your bed tea, sir, after W.C. or before?’ In reply, the M.L.A., who was not familiar with these new ways, replied innocently:

‘Get me a cup of each’.”

Nassar was extremely happy narrating these anecdotes particularly because we all had a hilarious laugh. We sincerely praised his sense of humour. Encouraged by our patting he told us that the ‘zangpol’ and ‘calpol’ story is the same MLA’s creation.

Since all of us were quite tired, Nassarullah’s jokes and anecdotes relieved the monotony. He was feeling like a hero amongst the militants.

“One day when I went to my village, I found the SHO (Station House Officer) of the J & K Police there. The SHO was a ‘chamcha’ (crony) of so-and-so MLA. He had been given a job in the police with his help. He was bullying the people for so many years. I wanted to teach him a lesson. One day I and another militant friend gave him a good thrashing, made him do a cock, one hundred sit-ups, and also snatched his rifle. Only when he begged for mercy, and promised to behave better, did we return his rifle and let him go.”

“These police people are good for nothing. They need this kind of thrashing. Are you talking about Khala?”, one of the militants voiced his opinion and queried.

“No, No. You don’t know him. He belongs to our village. Now he is always at my beck and call and gives me the salute even from a distance”, Nassar added.

“It seems to me that you should have been in the police force, and that SHO should be working on land. Everything appears topsy-turvy”, Omkar observed.

“Who would give us the job? We didn't have the money to pay. Nor did we have any relation to support our recruitment”, Ishaq said ruefully.

“Now, I think you've got lots of money. Do you have a house like this one, Ishaq?”, Kshema asked him changing the subject.

“If I had one, do you think that I'd have taken up the gun? Who wouldn't like to have a peaceful life?”, Ishaq said.

“Now is the time for you to ponder over this problem. Timber is nowadays freely available to militants. You ought to order a truckload of timber for your own home”, Kshema said.

“I've already done that. I don't want to have it free. But, I'll surely get it much cheaper. Besides, this militancy won't last long”, said Ishaq clarifying his position in a matter of fact way.

“The sooner you do it, the better would it be”, Kshema observed.

“Why are you taking so long to get timber? I helped many people in my area to get it. Under my protection they cut down mulberry and 'chinar' trees well”, Nassar informed us authoritatively.

“My God! Why did you get mulberry and 'chinar' trees cut? These are protected against destruction by law. You shouldn't have done this”, Omkar asked Nassar.

“That law was wrongly made by the Maharaja. It's against villagers' interests. We don't want it. Lots of villagers have benefited by my help. Previously we would need ages to get permission to cut such a tree. Now we don't have to ask anyone”, Nassar said proudly.

“But mulberry trees are needed by villagers for sericulture work. Don't those people suffer?”, Omkar asked.

“Forget about that! Villagers don't feel interested in sericulture any longer. They find the trade unprofitable”, Nassar informed us.

We were shocked to hear these remarks and to our dismay,

we realized why the silk trade in the valley was dying a sad death.

"Now that you are rapidly cutting trees, you should also ask people to plant more trees. For every tree you cut, ten more should be planted. The trees are our wealth. This is our treasure. You should use your clout to spread this message to the people."

"We'll think over these matters after 'azadi' ", another militant added in a very casual way.

"Till then, the whole valley would be converted into a desert", Kshema added.

"Yes, we've to turn it into a desert. Let there be ruins everywhere!", another militant said in frustration.

In the evening one of the leaders of Hizbullah organisation namely Tanwir-ul-Islam accompanied by Sajjad and two other militants suddenly appeared at our hideout. We were desperately yearning to know about our ultimate fate. Naturally, we were keenly waiting for him to open his mouth. But there was a long wait. He alongwith some other militants went into another room for their evening 'namaz' (prayers) and subsequent parleys about our situation. Only Nassar and Ishaq were left behind to keep an eye on us.

"Why haven't you gone with them to offer prayers?", Kshema asked.

"We don't belong to the top brass of the organisation. We're okay as we are", Ishaq replied somewhat bitterly.

Thereupon Ishaq and Nassar offered their prayers in the room and we also sat in silence for our meditation.

After we finished our meals, it was time to proceed to another place. The householder had expressed that someone who had visited the house in the day had leaked information to the village folk. Therefore, he had persuaded the militants to change the hideout. We were taken to another house, not far from this one, which was newly built at a secluded spot on a hillock. We had entered the premises unannounced. The lady of the house was

somewhat rude and didn't want to let us in. Not knowing who we were, she refused to open the main door. Her brother-in-law, who had guided us to this house, however ordered her to open the door, which she did instantly. As soon as she looked at us, she became nervous and apologetic. In a jiffy, her tone became very polite and she welcomed us happily showing us into a large nice hall of the house.

We were amazed to notice that the lady of the house was rather familiar to us. We recollected that we had seen her earlier, in the other household, where she had come as a patient to see Omkar in connection with her chronic ailment. Omkar had prescribed her good commonsense treatment for her psychosomatic illness.

We found that she was not only pretty and clever but also fairly educated. Also by her actions, we got the clear impression that in the home she was wearing the pants, whereas her husband played the second fiddle as a nice good, homely person possessing polite manners. The household seemed, in every way, quite prosperous. The bedding including the quilts, as well as blankets of foreign make were available in good numbers. As we came to know more about them, the lady revealed to us the prosperous background of her family. She was very proud of her brother, who was working in a Gulf country. He was very indulgent towards her and bestowed her with many precious and beautiful goods from abroad, which she proudly exhibited in the course of her gracious and lavish hospitality shown to us. We were immensely happy to be with this family whom we liked very much. We also taught their children. They were gracious enough to offer us a separate room for our stay but this was not allowed by our captors. So a dozen of us slept in the same room for the night.

Tanwir-ul-Islam didn't, on his own, come forth with any information about us. So we had to press him hard in order to know something from the horse's mouth. He was very critical of

the Government's stance, which depressed us a lot. Once again, we lost all hope and were reconciled to our fate. We were left with only one hope, that some day God's own intervention might reverse our fate.

We again had some discussion with Tanwir-ul-Islam on religious and political issues. He raised the question of idol worship by the Hindus on which he had very strong views. We argued with him and explained the basic principles of all religions to him. Everyone participated in the conversation. Our host and hostess were equally enthusiastic in their approach. It appeared they were quite vehement in their liberal views which were reinforced by the firsthand information given to them about other Islamic countries by the hostess's brother. Although, all of us couldn't agree with each other about everything, we had a strong feeling that the conversation had been mutually beneficial. The walls of mistrust, anger, and hatred had been broken somewhat and we had come closer as human beings. We had become aware of our common characteristics of fearfulness, need for love, need for living a good happy life and desire for personal freedom and self-government. We had the overwhelming feeling that everyone was reasonably convinced about the fact that all religions teach the same thing. This is particularly obvious if people let the basic message shine forth beyond the frozen and stagnant mind-sets perpetuated by organized religion or its custodians.

Next morning Tanwir-ul-Islam and his militant colleagues were seen off by Latram Peer who accompanied them on their onward journey.

Kshema had a lovely hot bath after many days. The big boiler attached to the kitchen had boiling hot water which was perpetually kept so by means of a crude homemade electric water heater. Everyone did indeed have a good hot bath here and the kind lady washed all our clothes cheerfully. We were rather surprised to see such abundance of electricity in this farflung

village, whereas in the city of Srinagar the scarcity of electric power was acute. Firstly, there is no electricity twice a week. Secondly, when light comes one cannot see even one's own hand under the light bulb! This village household had a transformer located nearby with the result that the voltage was just fine. Also they were using electricity with abandon and obviously not paying for it at all. In the course of our conversation with the host on this subject, he said: "Hardly anyone pays for electricity. There's a tremendous deficit in the revenue of the department. If at all we talk about raising the tariff or making efforts to induce people to pay up, there is a great hue and cry over the matter. The deficit now runs into crores. I wonder if people will ever understand these things."

It was quite evident from his talk that there was dichotomy between what he was saying and doing in practice. Probably, he believed he had a right to do that because he seemed to have some clout.

Our conversation changed from topic to topic, and strangely once again veered round to the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits. We had to satisfy them with our explanations. The host also narrated to us an interesting anecdote in this connection.

"When I'd been to Jammu sometime back I met a Kashmiri Pandit who's our neighbour here and is now living in Jammu. We met each other while crossing the Tawi bridge. He held my hand warmly, embraced me, and took me to his home. He insisted that I have my meals with him and I obliged."

While he was narrating the incident, his wife intervened:

"Our neighbour braved the situation during the turmoil very nicely and stayed here for quite some time. Then he went to Jammu saying that he would return within a fortnight. He was certain to come back, because he'd already purchased a big tin of mustard oil and other household items. Unfortunately however, he didn't return back till date."

"Yes, he told me to use that oil and other items for ourselves. He'd lots of paddy too in his granary which also he offered for our use. But as soon as I returned back from Jammu his house was burnt and everything within it was reduced to ashes", the host said.

"My husband's meeting with our neighbour at Jammu proved to be nightmarish."

"Why so?" Kshema asked.

"Because one day, all of a sudden, a group of militants banged our door and forced their entry into the house. As my wife went out to talk to them, I hid myself under the cot, apprehending the worst because I had met my neighbour at Jammu. I was certain that I might be killed that day by the militants. The conversation in the lobby went on for some time and I overheard a few sentences. Only then it transpired to me that the militants had merely come to seek food and shelter for the night. As my wife came in alongwith them and settled them in this room she signalled me to come out of hiding. Reluctantly, and with fear still stalking me, I crawled out from under the cot. My back was aching and even I couldn't easily stand up. Immediately thereafter, both of us cooked meals for them. It was a large group of about twenty militants. I didn't mind serving these people at that time because I felt we'd got a new lease of life."

As he narrated this incident his children were giggling and reminding their father about some missing incident in between. He dramatized the narration by bodily acting out the sequence of events which brought forth hilarious laughter from all of us.

When Peer came back in the evening he threw himself down on the bolster. He seemed to be quite depressed but voluble. "I've had a tough time today. I'd an encounter with the army."

No sooner had he uttered these words than all the militants looked at him with their eyebrows raised.

"Army? Where? What happened?" asked one.

"Did you have any trouble?", enquired another.

"How did you manage to escape?" the third one asked.

"Thank God! I'm back here in one piece. I'd to bear a couple of hard slaps on my face. I didn't want to get caught. That would've been ruinous. Even now I am feeling a burning sensation", said Peer giving details.

"How did it all happen?", Javed asked.

"While coming back from the channel after seeing off the 'ameer', I was confronted by a patrolling party. In a jiffy I kept my gun on a tree. They didn't see me hiding the gun. Thank God! As soon as they came nearer, I pretended to be a commoner and began to wail.

'They've beat me. They've tortured me. Please give me protection.'

When they asked me: 'Who has tortured you?' I answered without any hesitation: 'Ugarwadi (terrorists). They've run away this way.' I said showing them the opposite route. While I was acting this way one of them slapped me quite hard and asked: 'Are you telling us the truth?' I had to pretend I was their own man. As soon as they moved away from the scene, I picked up my sandals and my gun, and here I am!"

"Why didn't you give back a slap? You should have given them a good thrashing", Javed asked Peer.

"Are you mad? You don't have to do such foolish things. Had I wished to do so, I'd have killed them in one go. In that case, I'd have also died. What then would have been the outcome of our mission? One has to keep cool and retain his wits under these circumstances."

"I wish every militant had wits like yours. Then we would have won big victories", Javed said.

"That's why he's called Latram", Ishaq added.

"Well, this is nothing. If I begin to narrate to you his other deeds, it will take me the whole night", Nassar was showing how

closely he was associated with Latram Peer. Javed looked at us meaningfully conveying his appreciation of Latram's capabilities. Without saying so, he wanted to convey how brave and courageous he was.

Peer was feeling himself on top of the world, quite satisfied, having all his colleagues huddled round him in deep reverence.

"Did you get our clothes and other items?", they finally ventured to ask.

"Why are you bothered about your clothes? In guerrilla warfare you have to forego all luxuries. Look at me. I don't care about my clothes, although I can get anything I desire", Peer said in a patronizing tone.

While Peer was narrating his story, the host and his wife also joined us. She got apples for us and when one of the militants asked her for a knife, she promptly took it out from the pocket of her 'pheran' saying: "I always keep a knife and thread and needle in my pocket. In fact, I got into some trouble when I was once searched by the army."

"What was the problem? Why?"

"They asked me about the knife. And I told them that it was my 'Sonat' (Sunnah Muslim religious obligation) to always carry a knife and thread and needle with me. Indeed, I follow these religious instructions meticulously", she replied.

Chapter 11

UGP

WE simply walked out of our hideout late in the dark part of the night. The host walked with us for some distance and waved a final goodbye as we moved out of his sight. Having traversed a few kilometres through paddy fields we reached the banks of a hill stream just near a road bridge. From a distance we could see a passenger bus parked on the road with its lights on. One of the militants immediately ran upto the bus, called out the driver and conductor, who were sitting inside the bus, and asked them to put out the lights and sit quietly. They obeyed instantly.

We took off our shoes and crossed the 'nallah' (stream) carefully till we reached the other bank. There we went up a long flight of stone steps, thence past a holy shrine, into a house located on the outskirts of the village. The host was perhaps expecting our arrival, he opened the door without any fuss, and settled us immediately in a room on the first floor.

Although the house was big, the room airy and newly built, yet we also discovered that the host had quite reluctantly obliged the militants. We had to make do with whatever little bedding was available in the room because they were not in a mood to provide more inspite of the militants' requests.

We were terribly sad and disgusted, and even the militants seemed unhappy. Things were made worse by the stark contrast of the conditions in the previous hideout and this one. Here the electric lights were non-existent whereas in the previous one we have had an illumination.

There was nothing much for us to do. So we tried to pray and get some sleep. As soon as the militants thought that we were fast asleep they began to have a long chat amongst themselves.

"Sometimes I feel disgusted with this kind of life. I don't know why we are doing all this. Leaving behind our homes and families, we are running around like fugitives", Peer said in a dejected tone.

As soon as we heard this conversation we were alerted. We hadn't got any sleep anyway. We kept quiet, didn't stir in our bed, and listened carefully.

"Didn't you go home? What about your harvest of paddy? Did you arrange something about that?", Nassar asked Peer.

"Of course, I did arrange some help. Had I gone myself, my family wouldn't have allowed me to return back", Peer said.

"Don't they know where you're?", Ishaq enquired.

"Of course, they do know. But at the same time they are not happy about it. My father doesn't want me to leave my family, especially my three children like this. He says that I have some responsibility towards them", Peer said.

"Yes, I've also left behind my wife and children. I feel bad right now. Don't know why we got into this mess? It began like an epidemic plague. I too feel disgusted", Ishaq added to what Peer was saying.

We didn't hear Javed's voice in their conversation and presumably he was already fast asleep. In any case they were not trusting him either about such personal matters.

"I was in fact, doing very well in life. Also I was running a saw-mill, and doing good business. Due to a property dispute with my brothers, I had to sell the mill to settle accounts with them", Peer reminisced about his past.

"Why couldn't you keep the mill for yourself?", Nassar asked.

"I was doing well with my business of smuggling contraband 'charas' (hashish). I made a number of successful trips to Calcutta. Unfortunately, destiny betrayed me. I got into a scrape, had a bad time, which ultimately landed me in jail. Then I'd no

option but to sell the mill", Peer said sighing deeply.

"In fact, I also would like to do some kind of business. Why don't we join together and deal in selling walnuts", Nassar said seriously.

"How can we do that now? We've the army on one side and our own organisation on the other. They won't let us have normal life again. On top of it, we are locked with these hostages at the moment", Ishaq said rather grumbling.

"Is there any chance of their release soon?", Nassar asked.

"Yeh chhai wayit ropai (this is a sterling rupee). This's an important catch", Peer said.

"Really?"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course, I'm certain. I heard it said today", Peer emphasized.

"What did you hear?" Nassar asked.

"I'm told there is quite some hue and cry about them in the Parliament and other places."

"But the Kashmir government doesn't seem to be bothered about our demands", Ishaq said.

"How long can they turn a deaf ear? They'll have to do something", Peer replied.

At this juncture Kshema heaved a deep sigh, which let the cat out of the bag. They suspected that we were awake because they immediately changed the subject of their nocturnal chatter.

"From tomorrow onwards you'll have an easier way of dealing with these people."

"How come?"

"We're going towards the higher mountains. There we'll dump them in one of the underground hideouts. There they'll have some breathing problem for which we'll provide an oxygen cylinder. The bank manager has been already shifted there", Latram Peer said.

"Is he all right there?", Ishaq enquired.

"No, No, I heard that his health is deteriorating and he's turned terribly pale."

Hearing this conversation Omkar got terribly nervous particularly because he is very much afraid of closed spaces. Kshema reassured him with a signal of pressing hands that all will be well.

We don't know when and how we finally slept thereafter.

When we woke up early in the morning, we found the walls of the corridor in the ground floor beautifully painted with floral designs. We hadn't observed these due to darkness on the previous night. This was an unusual and neatly executed work of folk art which has practically died in every village of Kashmir. It was, however, very reassuring to see some spark still alive in a remote village. What a strange alchemy of socio-cultural circumstances is evident in places.

Latram Peer started off as usual for his daily round of channel contact. When he was about to go, Nassar held the hem of his 'pheran' and said: "You promised to me the other day, that you'd go to my home and get me news about my family. But, you didn't keep your promise. If you permit me, I'll also go and look up my family."

"No, Don't worry. I'll go to see your family today. You needn't come with me. Better stay here", Peer said pausing for a while and then again continued: "All right, you come upto the 'bazar' (market) with me to get a pot of 'dahi' (yoghurt) for aunty and Dr. Sahib. They're asking for it." Saying this Peer looked at us showing how concerned he was. We gave him a grateful smile and said: "Thank you, Peer Sahib. We needed this badly. Besides, you shouldn't forget to bring our medicine."

"Medicine I'll surely get. But I'm not sure about the pot of 'dahi' because in the villages they rarely make it. If you're lucky we may get it." Peer left the room with Nassar.

After an hour or so Nassar returned with two pots of

excellent 'dahi'. "This is very precious because I'd to fetch it from a distant place."

Javed and Ishaq were quite happy to look forward to have some 'dahi' with their meals after a long time.

We are reminded here of the fact that whenever we asked for 'dahi' from some hosts, they would provide us hot boiling milk instead. It transpired that in the villages they do have milk with rice once in a while, but not 'dahi' as we do in the towns.

Nassarullah had also brought cigarettes from the market for themselves because their previous day's quota was exhausted. Lately they had been smoking rather heavily and the sight of cigarettes would get them into an ecstasy. Like movie heroes they would puff out smoke in a relaxed mood forming many rings and shapes in the process. Watching them in this condition, we could see a strange sense of satisfaction and fulfilment on their faces. Such of their moods were very close to being natural, genuine, and innocent perhaps arising out of those hidden depths of love in every human heart. These were indeed the moments when they would pour out their hearts sharing with us the funny, happy and sad incidents in their personal lives.

Nassar was desperately looking for a transistor. Omkar had already got one and he was trying to get some more news from the BBC.

"Dr. Sahib, give me the radio. I want to hear some music", Nassar requested.

"Let us get the latest news. We ought to know what's going on", Omkar replied.

"Don't bother about BBC. They're crooks. They are hardly concerned with news about us", Nassar said dissuading Omkar to forget about the news.

It was no doubt true that the BBC had not given any news about Kashmir for several days which had disappointed the militants.

"Can't you do without listening to film music? Don't you get fed up with it, listening to it twentyfour hours a day", Kshema asked Nassar with obvious irritation.

"Even while in Pakistan I didn't give up listening to film songs", Nassar said.

"For doing that you must have had good banging. You were training in arms or what?", Kshema asked him.

"I won't give up my hobby at any cost. There I used to watch quite a few movies. Now we've to do without that", Nassar said.

"Who're you favourite hero and heroine?"

"Sri Devi and Amitabh Bachchan", Nassar exclaimed and continued with his reminiscences:

"Once there was a hot rumour in Pakistan that Sri Devi is dead. We were quite upset and all of us staged a 'dharna' (sit-in strike) on that account. Thereafter, we also took out a procession."

"Dharna! for what?", Kshema asked surprised.

"We wanted to find out if this rumour was true. We wanted details", Nassar said.

"Were all the youth from Kashmir?", Ishaq asked him.

"Yes, of course. We went to meet the Camp Commander and asked him about the matter. He was furious with us and sent us off saying that we're fighting against India, we shouldn't be bothered about all this. But we insisted upon getting the truth and didn't budge. Also we shouted slogans: We want Sri Devi. Long live Sri Devi."

"This is amazing. Why were you so fascinated by Sri Devi?", Omkar asked Nassar.

"The Camp Commander was perhaps right. Why did you make so much fuss about her?", Kshema said.

"Because, we've a right over her", Nassar said.

"Right over her? For what", Kshema asked.

"Because she's been shooting movies in Kashmir", Nassar replied innocently.

"Oh! I see."

After this conversation Nassar was lost in his own world of fantasy.

"I am thinking of kidnapping Amitabh Bachchan. Tell me, how can we do that?", Nassar was now chatting with his colleagues.

"It isn't so easy to kidnap him. He hardly ever comes to Kashmir these days", Ishaq said.

"And, he's always got commandoes with him", Javed added with some seriousness. We could see that he was not approving of Nassar's conversation in this lighter vein. He expected his militant colleagues to be more serious. But, at the same time, he too was amused by the conversation. Also he would often keep combing his hair several times a day trying to match them with those of his movie hero.

"So many people tell me that my hair style resembles that of Amitabh Bachchan. What is your opinion?", Javed asked Kshema.

"Cent per cent, you look better than him", Kshema replied with admiration. He was delighted on hearing this.

"Amitabh Bachchan has a beautiful personality. I'm his fan and haven't missed any of his movies", Nassar boasted.

"What for do you want to kidnap him?" Omkar asked.

"We'd have tremendous fun. Besides we'd make a movie with him. We'll make him dance and do whatever we want him to. Won't that be a beautiful movie?", Nassar asked.

"Undoubtedly, you can sell that movie for crores of rupees. Overnight you will be millionaires", Kshema said.

"In that event, I want to become his private secretary", Nassar expressed his desire.

Latram Peer returned after the day's work looking quite tired. Immediately Nassar enquired from him about his family's welfare. Peer informed him: **"I'd gone to your home. Your daughter is ill. She has high fever. Don't worry. She'll be well."**

"I asked you to allow me to go home today. You didn't agree. I could have come back with you. Tomorrow I must go, come what may", Nassar insisted.

"How could you come back with me? I'd to sort out so many disputes of the people. Two cases held my total attention today", Peer said explaining how much preoccupied he was during the day.

"Which disputes did you've to deal with?", Ishaq asked curiously.

"Do you remember that person? He'd promised to pay us some good donation. Whereas he hasn't paid us a penny, he has shown a payment in the official records", Peer said.

"How treacherous he is? He can't get away like this? This is cheating", the militants exclaimed in unison.

"I'd have picked him up for interrogation today but I couldn't do it because I've got this responsibility", Latram Peer said pointing towards us.

"We shall tackle him later. But in the meanwhile you should have given him your mind", they said.

"That's precisely what I did. But he's a real fraud. He dodged me by saying that he's about to pay up", Latram said.

"Did he pay up?"

"No, he's promised to do so tomorrow. But I'm not going to accept that because I've to settle scores with him first for maligning us", Peer said.

"Why did you take so much time? Did you get that person appointed in the Irrigation Department?", Javed asked.

"That's an old tale. He's now working for a couple of days. The officer had issued an appointment order UGP", Latram informed.

Sitting quietly we were keenly following their conversation. Peer's remarks about the appointment of a person suddenly alerted us, and with utmost curiosity Omkar enquired: "What's

this UGP? I haven't heard that before?"

Latram Peer feeling quite alerted said: "This means 'Under Gun Point'!"

While saying this he's cynically laughing and continued: "The officers are thinking about their safety first."

"Is it written in the government order as well?" Omkar asked.

"Yes, of course!" He took out some paper from his pocket and showed us the names of a few persons saying, "These people are also going to be appointed by an UGP order. Since I didn't have the time to see those officers, this work is still pending." Then he switched over to describing another case in which he had to decide.

"I have to do justice in another dispute. I am puzzled, not knowing what verdict should I give."

"Justice for what?" Javed asked.

"It's a tricky case. We have to give a proper judgement according to the 'shariat' (Muslim personal law). One woman was already married to a man. When she returned to her parent's home, her maternal uncle married her again to another person. Meanwhile her previous husband was enquiring eagerly about her whereabouts. He wasn't given the correct information but was dodged instead. Finally he found her out, learnt about her second marriage. He was furious and is now claiming her back. At the same time, her second husband also doesn't want to part with her. Now I'm to sort out this matter; but I don't know what to decide."

"In accordance with the 'shariat' the second husband has a rightful claim", Ishaq observed.

"But, has she got a lawful divorce from her first husband? How could she marry another person?", Kshema asked.

"Her maternal uncle must have grabbed a good sum of money! Now I've to give a verdict on his misdeeds", Peer said cynically.

"In my opinion, the woman should be asked about her

choice. That would be appropriate", Kshema said.

"There's no room for that kind of choice in the 'shariat' law", Peer said emphatically.

They had a long discussion on this subject for obvious human reasons and were thoroughly hair-splitting over the 'shariat' rules.

Having rapidly changed a few hideouts in and around this village, we had to take another long journey in a taxi. During this period we found that Nassar was getting very anxious about his daughter's health. He was getting restless and keen to visit his family. In fact he had been pleading with Peer to permit him to go.

"You can't stop me when my daughter is ill. You'll be responsible if anything goes wrong. I'll kill you all, if something happens to my daughter. I'll not spare the 'Nazam' (organisation)", Nassar said in an angry voice.

"No, it's not in my hands. You can't be spared. It's the order of the 'Nazam' and high command."

"I don't care about the high command. You're our 'ameer' this time and we've to obey you, and only you."

"Okay! It's my order that you won't go today. Besides, your daughter will be alright by now."

"Listen, Latram, if anything happens to my daughter you will be wholly and solely responsible for that. When you don't let me go, then you should get me news about her well-being."

"Be at ease. I'll get news from that end", Peer assured him.

Two more militants joined us at this stage. They were newcomers whom we had never seen before. In fact, we gathered that they had arranged the vehicle and the new hideout. We had to traverse some zig-zag hill roads over mountainous slopes. When the taxi finally halted on a hill-top, we could see no houses or a village nearby. In the distance we saw the pine forest on the mountains.

We had to walk down the side of the hill to a village which

seemed to be situated in a sort of ditch. Although we couldn't observe much in the pitch dark night, we had a feeling that the village was inhabited by poor and wretched people. As we entered a very poor and rickety house, our spine was chilled by the shock on seeing the rubbish, junk, and the spider webs in the room in which we were expected to stay. Half of this small and clumsy room was filled with empty boxes meant for packing apples. When a candle was lit, to our horror, the light exposed a pile of filthiest possible bedding piled up on one side of the room. The dirt on the bedding had completely obliterated the print and colours of the bedding. Our bodies began to itch and we felt like scratching ourselves all over. When we hesitated even to squat on the floor, Peer said: "We had arranged a better place for our stay. But unfortunately that house is already occupied by a group of JKLF. Now we've no option."

"We're used to this sort of life. You must be feeling upset", Ishaq said showing us sympathy.

"Guerrilla warfare is not a bed of roses. Thank God! Tomorrow we may not get even this shelter", Nassar said.

"You know, what Nassar had been saying all the time. Someone had predicted that in this kind of 'Jehad' people will in the first place open their doors of welcome and feed us properly. In the second phase, they will show lot of reluctance in admitting us into their houses. Later, they will chase us out of their homes. Finally, they will bang the door in our faces. Under those circumstances, we mujahids may have to take shelter inside sewer pipes", Javed narrated.

"I think ~~this~~ place is worse than a sewer. Things couldn't be more horrifying than this", Kshema said with utmost disgust.

Nassarullah immediately got hold of a broken transistor and began listening to movie music. The hoarse sounds and the oscillating volume thereof from this broken set was quite jarring to us. But Nassar's powerful sense of humour would bring some

cheer even in these pathetic circumstances. He said: "This radio is perfectly matching with this house and the environment here. A good radio would have been a misfit."

"Tomorrow, we'll take you to a better place. Today, you bear with us", the militant guide informed us somewhat apologetically. They had just dropped in to say good night to us and promptly went away to spend the night somewhere else.

This was a hellish night for us. We felt insects and lice creeping all over our bodies. The bedding was stinking and we were choking. Feelings of nausea and disgust, coupled with uncertainty about our fate gave rise to a morbid fear in our minds. Every moment seemed to take ages to pass. We didn't have a wink of sleep while we wondered how the militants were lying in deep slumber in these frightening conditions. We were disturbed by their loud snoring.

Our minds were restless, pondering over what we could do to escape from this veritable hell. In whispers we talked about running away from the place and bolting the door behind us. But then we pondered over the consequences carefully, and decided that it was safer to bear this misery rather than get killed on the roadside by the two local militants who might be keeping a strict vigil in the surrounding village, which practice they usually followed.

With the dim light of the early dawn coming through the slits in the closed window the long dark night was at last over. Hope was again surging in our hearts and we heaved a sigh of relief that the filthy bedding would soon be stacked away in a corner of the room. We looked forward to some change during the day.

Early morning we went out of the house to look for the use of a bathroom. To our utter disgust there wasn't a single place around the whole area where we could privately sit and ease ourselves. The whole village was filthy, full of muck and dust. We had the feeling that the place was abandoned by man as well as

nature. It was devoid of any vegetation and we could see a solitary tree even which looked barren. The people were extremely poor and didn't seem to have much work to do. For whole day long they were roaming, chatting and sitting idly on the steps of their houses. No doubt, we observed an abundance of little babies and children, who were almost naked and wallowing in the dirt and filth around the whole place. There was, however, one saving grace in this hell. We saw a drinking water point in the centre of the village where many women were gathered to wash their pots and pans and carry drinking water to their homes. Nearby there were many children playing and splashing water on each other from the outgoing drain. They were thoroughly enjoying; having fun as if they were on a sea beach! That's the miracle of innocence we thought. Life in the village was going on with its normal rhythm and nobody appeared to be bothered about what was going on around them.

Kshema was sitting on the window sill trying to bask in the little sunshine that was coming in. She was horrified to see quite a number of ladies sitting on dirty hill slopes combing and delicing each other's hair. They would eventually kill the lice and the nits on their thumb nails and carry on with their task with unflinching concentration. Seeing this Kshema had a feeling of nausea and she was about to vomit. The militants wondered what was happening to her. When she told them about it they didn't react at all. They accepted the situation in a matter-of-fact way, although amongst all of them, Javed was quite fastidious about his cleanliness.

That day we just didn't feel like eating anything in the morning. The poor householder had taken pains to make rice and fried fish for us. But since we were already on a vegetarian diet due to 'Navratra' (Hindu festival lasting nine days) we didn't eat anything.

At this time for some mysterious reason, Omkar went

through a frightening experience during the day, the like of which he never had before. He felt a strange choking sensation and heaviness in his chest. He wanted to get out of this place which was not in our hands. So he went out frequently and walked up and down the hill slope thereby getting some respite from this frightening sensation. While he was in the room for long, he felt like jumping out from the solitary window to escape the feeling of what he thought was perhaps claustrophobia. All the time, however, we had recourse to chanting of our prayers with greater zeal and concentration, believing that even this phase of our lives might pass away soon. That belief was the only hope in these circumstances.

For a change, we chatted with the militants again and made them ponder over the innumerable problems that the people in the villages were facing.

"You should be grateful to these people. In spite of their poverty, they have provided a good meal to you", Omkar said.

"They're landless labourers. We have to do something and get them some employment", Ishaq said.

"By the time you're going to provide them work, their number would be four times more. Don't you see this huge population of starving children here? It's this perpetual problem of excess population. There isn't enough for all and many people are chasing a few available things. Just see for yourself what I'm talking about", Omkar said, asking them to look at a child eating a few throwaway morsels on the steps outside.

"It's prohibited in Islam to meddle with God's ways. No Musalman is allowed to have family planning", Ishaq said in response to my suggestion.

"I don't think you are correct in saying so. On the other hand, crores of Muslims all over the world have endorsed the need for preventing excess of population", Omkar explained.

In the late afternoon Kshema went out into the open to get

some fresh air and go to the bathroom. To her utter dismay, she found that many men and women were roaming about the whole area so much so that she couldn't find any secluded place to sit where she wouldn't be observed by the people. During this search, while she was moving from place to place, her eyes fell on a signboard of the Social Welfare Department hanging from the verandah of a house. The board indicated the name of the village as well.

When Kshema returned to the room and sat down, she was immediately confronted by Javed, who was furiously angry: "You're going to put yourself in trouble. I warn you. Again, you've been found to flout our instructions. We can't tolerate this", he shouted at Kshema.

Both of us were taken aback and alarmed wondering what had happened to suddenly make him so violent and wild.

"What's happened? Why are you shouting? What's the matter?", Kshema asked.

"Ask yourself, what you have done. Look at Dr. Sahib. He obeys us, whereas you're always making us jittery", Javed said.

"Be frank and tell me what's happened? Why aren't you precise? Has anybody died?", Kshema was much perturbed, angry and in tears.

"She's been to the bathroom. What has she done? Why are you rude? I don't like this at all", Omkar said with sadness.

"You've to behave as long as you're with us. Do you know I'm 'ameer'? These are my orders", Javed retorted.

"Yes, you're 'ameer'. Do you have any idea who we are? We know what you are", Kshema said angrily.

"Yes, you don't know who I'm. I am brother of the chief of Hizbullah. I can deal with you the way I want to", Javed said giving the impression that he was deliberately disclosing his superior clout in the organisation.

Nassar and Ishaq, who were also somewhat dazed, intervened

in the matter at this juncture.

"Why are you stretching the matter too far? What happened?"

"She's seen the signboard of this village in order to know the name of the place", Javed said.

When he uttered these words both of us heaved a sigh of relief.

"Have I seen this board deliberately? Do you think I should've shut my eyes? Didn't I have to search for a bathroom? Have you kept us in a five star hotel, where we needn't have to venture out? Tell me, what crime have I committed? Yes, I have seen the signboard. So what? You're making a mountain of a molehill", Kshema said in a terribly furious tone. Before Javed could say anything further, Omkar wanted to pacify him.

"You shouldn't talk in that manner with your elders. We're just like your parents, and we sincerely think of you as our children. Such behaviour would bring you severe trouble."

We could see that these words had the desired impact on them. Whereas Ishaq and Nassarullah quietly sat with their heads bent down, Javed lit a cigarette and lied down with his face turned away from us.

A little later Omkar became restless again; he got up and began to pace inside the room. His heart was filled with a strange mix of sadness and compassion when he found Javed incessantly sobbing. We allowed him his way without telling him anything.

Meanwhile, Omkar was pondering over his horoscope and mentally calculating as to why and which combination of planetary conjunctions was indicative of our present ordeal, and how long we would be stuck in this web. He also began to look at Kshema's palm. While we were doing so, Ishaq and Nassar moved nearer to us and offered their open palms.

"Please Dr. Sahib, tell us something about our fate. It seems you know quite a lot about it", Ishaq said.

"Your hand is very clear. You got a long life line", Omkar said while examining Ishaq's palm carefully.

"Do tell me, what I've got to do now?"

"You've to do some business. It is indicated by your hand. I don't know why you've taken up the gun. There isn't any such indication in your palm. Whatever work you take up you will succeed in that. See this fate line here." As Omkar said this Nassarullah was getting impatient.

"Let me also show my palm, okay, you now make plans about your business", Nassarullah said stretching his palm before Omkar.

"Your palm indicates that you've got good fortune because of someone whom you love dearly", Omkar's words struck the right chord in Nassar's heart. He was quite pleased with these remarks which he showed by nodding his agreement. While the session on hand reading was going on, Peer also came back after his day's routine. Without enquiring about anything, he straightaway went and sat beside Omkar. It was obvious that he too was attracted towards palmistry. He put forth his hand and waited for details.

"Did you ever have some sort of business, contract or shop? How come you are in this militant game? This is not indicated at all. Besides, you'll never have any money problem."

Before Omkar completed his comments, Peer was quick to answer: "It's amazing! How precise is your reading! It's true, I was never short of money. But now I'm fed up with this kind of life. Tell me, how long have I got to be in the present role?", Peer asked.

"Not for long, if I may say so, your life line shows that clearly. You'll be plunging into some good business again. What you're doing at present is a sort of recreation for you. Tell me frankly, your family must not be approving of your present role. Am I correct?", Omkar asked.

"If they had their way they would bury me alive. Now I'm

seriously thinking of taking up trade in walnuts", Peer said.

Not being happy with his having been left alone, Javed quietly lit yet another cigarette and moved closer to us.

"Come on, Javed, let me see your palm now", Omkar said to him in a conciliatory tone.

"Yes, yes, see his palm. Let me know why he gets into nasty fits quite often", Kshema added sarcastically.

Javed responded immediately giving a smile to Kshema and showing his palm to Omkar.

"You have an excellent hand. You should have been in the regular army. Not in this game. See this island on your life line. This is the period of your present life. It'll be over soon. Thereafter, you won't have to run around like a fugitive. In which month were you born?", Omkar asked.

"In November."

"Oh, I see. That's why you are of a suspicious nature, a typical scorpio. At the same time you are a determined person. You can go far if your goals are clear. You are strong willed too. See this erect unbending thumb of yours. You must set absolutely clear goals for yourself. You have got to continue your studies again. Even though you love to learn about guns, you can have proper training in a regular army. You are not too old to achieve these ambitions." These details given by Omkar pleased Javed immensely, and he felt elated saying: "In the National Cadet Corps, the officers used to praise my skill. I was the best cadet in the camp."

"You're still young enough to complete your studies. There is nothing impossible to achieve provided you apply your mind sincerely for achieving worthwhile goals. I foresee a very good future for you", Omkar said.

Peer was meanwhile getting anxious about our move and he ordered us to get ready. At this point, Nassarullah threw a tantrum.

"You can't drag me like this while my daughter is dying. Let me go home today. I promise to come back tomorrow." Nassar was desperate.

"I can't allow you to go home until I get permission from the top. In any case you won't go today", Peer replied categorically.

"Who's going to look after my daughter? If something happens to her, you'll have to bear the responsibility. I've been requesting you to send me for duty in my own 'belt' (militants' domain of influence around the area), which you've refused. In that case, I could do the work of the organisation as well as be nearer my home", Nassar said.

"It's not upto you to choose the work for yourself. You've to follow the discipline of the organisation", Peer admonished him.

"What kind of organisation is this? They don't care about their men. What have they done for me? I've suffered and got this LMG on my shoulders. So I'll do what I choose to do", Nassar retorted.

"Don't get sentimental. I'll surely send you home; tomorrow positively, from the other hideout", Peer pacified him.

Chapter 12

Disenchantment

AFTER another long and hazardous journey by taxi and on foot, we finally found ourselves in the midst of an apple orchard on a mountainous terrain. The atmosphere being pitch dark and very quiet, even the slightest rustling of leaves or the flutter of a bird's wings would put our captors on the alert. They would cock their guns and stand on alert to fight anyone who would challenge them. Peer, Ishaq, and another local militant went towards the village for a recy, leaving us behind in the orchard with Javed, Nassarullah and another militant. It was very cold at this high altitude and we were shivering in our inadequate woollen clothing provided to us by the militants. Peer and others took a great deal of time to return. This delay made the militants who were staying with us quite restless. By their actions they also made us ill at ease and fearful.

At long last, when they came back we moved onwards, up the hill slope to land in a solitary bungalow atop a mound. We couldn't believe our eyes that this would be our abode for the night, although we were by now much used to going through extremes of living conditions, our moods alternating between those of joy and sorrow in quick succession.

We were settled in a cozy room, and as we squatted we closely scanned the surroundings discovering to our joy that the place was clean, beautiful and comfortable. In contrast with the previous filthy place, this abode looked like heaven. The bedding on the cot must have been much used before, but still it appeared to be the cleanest ever we have had for many days. We slept well that night.

As we woke up early morning, the sun was rising behind the mountain throwing its beams of golden yellow over the entire area which made some rooftops of houses, at a far away distance, glitter like jewels. The terraced paddy fields wore beautiful golden hues; and the majestic pine trees of deep dark green colour embraced the sun beams, playing hide and seek with them in the mild breeze that was flowing by. Here and there, men and women were moving along the hilly paths with stacks of hay on their heads. We kept the window open and concentratedly watched this breathtaking scene with utmost joy. We forgot, for a while, that we were in captivity. Nature was at its most beautiful. We experienced a fullness within our hearts which seemed to have washed off our agony, sorrow and discomfort by this bountiful enchanting whiff of freshness. For a change, we had a nice breakfast as well.

Peer took along Nassar with himself. As promised by him, Nassar was relieved to go home for the night. He was delighted; and childlike, he jumped and whistled joyfully at the prospect of seeing his family.

Our host was a youngman. His parents were also living in the same house and we presumed it was a joint family. Whereas the eldest lady of the house was looking after the chores in the kitchen, two younger ladies were doing other errands in and around the house. The family was well-to-do and modern. The verandians around the house were stacked with piles of walnuts left to dry. From their conversation, we learnt that the family was engaged in walnut and fruit trade, besides having a shop in the vicinity of the village.

During the day we found that a contractor from Amritsar had come along with a truck to take away the walnuts and fruit. So they all got busy filling sackfuls of walnuts. While they were doing so in our very presence, the ladies put a couple of walnuts on the window sill and the verandah railing. Later on we

discovered that this was done in order to ward off our evil eye!

The household was bilingual because the ladies spoke both Kashmiri and Pahari languages with equal ease. Also we found that their children were well-fed, better clad, and possessed of good manners and disposition. They attended the nearby village school. Our good and prosperous hosts gave us roasted corn and walnuts to eat and left us alone without any disturbance. Later they served us a good vegetarian meal prepared with lot of care.

During the day we were listening to beautiful songs on a radio provided by the host. The music was befitting the environment and the mood of the moment. While the music was on, all of a sudden Kshema got up and danced freely in tune with the music. Ishaq was feeling somewhat embarrassed when Kshema said: "We're a family here. I'm like your mother. Don't feel shy. Come on, join me all of you. Let's have a dance."

She requested everyone to join but Omkar and Ishaq didn't oblige her, while Javed stood up and danced freely.

"Your steps are wonderful. I've also learnt some dancing", Javed said.

"Yes, I could feel. That's why I asked you to get up. These are good things of life. You should never suppress these feelings." After this brief spell of dancing we could see that both Ishaq and Javed had a strange and positive transformation in their outlook which was evident by Ishaq's remarks: "You told us that we are your children. I feel so close to you. I don't know why."

Later, when Kshema went downstairs for a stroll, Javed went with her to keep guard. As soon as they came back into the room Javed had a sudden fit of fainting which made him fall down flat on the floor. We were stricken with panic. The colour of his face turned into a death-like palour. Immediately, Omkar directed Ishaq to rub Javed's feet and he himself opened his jacket and rubbed his chest. Kshema was rubbing his perspiring forehead.

The host's daughter was asked to quickly fetch a glass of water. While we were busy with him, we could see his fit subsiding slowly. Soon he came into his own and opened his eyes.

"How are you feeling now? Do you feel any pain in your chest?" Omkar asked him.

"I'll be okay. I'm feeling better now. I don't know what happened to me."

"Did you have this kind of problem ever before?" Omkar asked.

"Yes, I do get such bouts occasionally."

"Haven't you had any treatment for this? This is not good", Omkar said.

When he saw all of us around him, we could feel and see that he had tears of gratitude in his eyes. He was very much moved by our concern for him.

"I'm sorry, I gave you trouble."

"Don't you bother. Just rest for a while till you feel better", saying this Kshema got up and put a few cushions behind him making him comfortable as he sat. She also asked Ishaq to open the other window and said: "Look out, isn't this a wonderful scenery? Look at this, Javed. You'll feel better by watching this scene. Doesn't it appear like a painting on the wall?" Kshema was diverting Javed's attention.

"Yes, it's wonderful."

"Do you know how to paint?", Omkar asked him.

"Yes, I used to do it. In school I took part in painting competitions. It's an old story. I haven't done it for ages now!", Javed said sadly.

"How are you feeling now?", Ishaq asked still rubbing Javed's feet.

"Don't you think we should have been free to enjoy this beautiful sight? How I wish my children were here. They would be delighted to see this place", Kshema observed.

"I wish we could have a picnic here", Javed said with a deep sigh.

" 'Rogan Josh' (Kashmiri mutton roast) and 'Nan' (baked leavened bread) would be appropriate for such a picnic", Kshema said.

As evening approached, we were looking forward to Peer returning and ordering us to move to another place. But to the militants' dismay, Peer did not turn up on that day which made our captors quite nervous. The local militant wanted us to change and move to another hideout, but Javed and Ishaq were quite reluctant to agree because they had no instructions from Latram Peer in this regard. Not knowing what would be the conditions like at the next place, we didn't want Peer to return so that we could stay put in this good place. However, we could also sense that the householders wanted us to quit because the whole day long they had been sending word to the militants to this effect because they were expecting guests from Baramullah. Javed promised them that we would leave this place early next morning. Somehow they reluctantly agreed and said that they would wake us up early next morning for the move.

Our captors held parleys amongst themselves and decided that they would not take any risk and would, therefore, not move from this house until Peer came back. Next morning, however, the householder as per their agreement, woke us up before dawn and asked us to pack up and quit. All the militants ignored the host's instructions and told us to stay put. After half an hour another lady knocked at the door again for the same purpose. At this juncture, Javed and Ishaq were angry. They went out of the room, held parleys with the reluctant host, and came back fretting and fuming.

"They think they can dictate terms to us. We told them that we don't bother about their guests", Javed said. This made us very sad and we felt depressed. We cursed our stars for having forced

us in these shameful circumstances. Kshema became even sadder because she had seen a horrifying and strange dream during the night. When Kshema went downstairs to the toilet, she overheard the householders talking: "How shameless they're? Thrice we asked them to get out. They haven't budged an inch. Instead they scolded us."

"What scruples do they have?" As he said so, his eyes met Kshema's and he silenced others, by signalling her presence to them.

When Kshema came back, she narrated—what she had overheard—to the militants.

"Don't worry. We'll set them right. Don't bother about these people. Why are you depressed?", Ishaq said.

"I'm not depressed because of their attitude. But I've had a very bad dream", Kshema said.

"A bad dream? What was it? Tell us", Javed and Ishaq asked with lot of curiosity.

"I saw myself going towards an airport somewhere in a European country. The area was covered by many tall skyscrapers. There was a huge python which was moving up and down over the roofs of those buildings. In the dream, I saw myself in front of a very massive table on which there were hundreds of infants wrapped up in white muslin shrouds. The python was coming down from the tall buildings to eat up the infants. Its mouth was wide open. There was tremendous commotion amidst loud shouts of the people: 'Stop it! Stop it! it's going to eat the children.' All of a sudden I held the python near its head with my both hands. It was, however, struggling to free itself from my hands. The huge python was curling around me in the process. The python was also hissing poisonous fumes from its wide open mouth which made me feel sort of dizzy. I was feeling terribly strained holding the python in this manner, while I heard shouts behind me: 'Don't let it go! Don't let go! Hold on fast!'

“At that instant, when I was about to fall down, in a lightning flash, someone picked up the python from my hands and threw it far away. Although, I woke up from my dream there and then, even at this moment, I shudder to narrate or think about the dream.”

When Kshema had finished narrating the dream Ishaq commented: “I think it’s a good dream.”

“Whether it’s a good or a bad dream, I’m not bothered. But we must get free and be saved from this humiliation.”

“Insha Allah! (God willing) you’ll get free soon,” they said.

All through the day the hosts were very lukewarm to us. They were busy with their own affairs. However, at the time of serving us lunch they apologised to the militants for not being able to attend to them properly. They gave lots of excuses in order to mitigate the militants’ wrath.

The militants were keenly listening to the radio which was giving a live commentary on the cricket match being played between India and Pakistan at Sharjah. On the one hand they were keen about the outcome of this match, but on the other, they were quite sore about the fact that Pakistan is playing cricket with India at all.

“We are dying here. So many youths are getting killed and Pakistan is playing cricket with India. They incite us to fight India and here they are salting our wounds”, they said.

“What’s it got to do with you? Shouldn’t they play?”, Omkar asked.

“Why should they? They are having a war with India. Is it fair that they should play with India?”, Ishaq asked.

“But they’re not having a war with India”, Omkar said.

“Yes, they are our religious brothers. They are supporting us in our guerrilla warfare”, Ishaq said.

“Isn’t Azharuddin, Captain of the India team? He is also a Muslim. Don’t you have religious affinity with him?”, Kshema asked.

"Indian Muslims are 'Kafirs'. "

"Kafir? Why?"

"Because they're not supporting us in our 'Jehad'."

While Javed was listening to the commentary he was quite joyous until he realized that Pakistan was heading for a defeat. He lost all interest in the game. Finally, when he came to know that India had won the match he felt dejected and sad.

As evening approached Javed and Ishaq were thrilled when they heard Peer's voice coming from the compound downstairs.

"Thank God! He's come back. I was getting anxious about him, and thought he might have been caught by the army", Javed said.

"Nobody can catch Peer. He knows how to get out of their nets, being well-versed in guerrilla warfare", Ishaq said.

"Today we may have to go to another place", the third militant added.

When Peer entered the room he was accompanied by Nassar and another newcomer, a young militant whom we had not seen before. On seeing Nassar, Kshema asked him: **"How is your daughter?"**

"She's fine now and fully recovered with proper medicines", Nassar said this with a look of satisfaction on his face. Ishaq and Javed told Peer in whispers about the developments on the previous day. They're not sure about the antecedents of the newcomer, whom they would occasionally give suspicious looks.

"When you didn't turn up yesterday, we thought you might have been trapped by the army", Ishaq said with concern.

"Yes, the army is having crackdowns in so many villages. And for that reason, I couldn't at all contact the 'channel'. The army had cordoned off the whole area. I haven't a clue what the organisation is doing about this case. We have to be very careful from now onwards", Peer said.

"Where did you spend the night?"

"I spent the night with Nassar. He's unnecessarily getting panicky about his daughter."

After a little pause, Peer introduced the newcomer to the others. Pointing towards him, he said: "He's recently returned from Pakistan. He spent one and a half years there for training, and now has joined our organisation to get acquainted with the field work here; to see how we are operating."

"May I know your name, please?", Kshema asked the youngman.

For a while he didn't reply, instead he scratched his head and after thinking for a minute or so he said: "You can call me Farooq."

Peer had got some old newspapers with him. As the militants glanced through these pages they were gloating over Mushtaq Latram's heroic deed of cutting the thumb of one of the hostages. The newspaper had shown the photograph of the thumb packed neatly in a box of cotton wool which had been reported to have been sent to the Governor. They discussed the matter amongst themselves and also mentioned that Mushtaq Latram, being very daring, was capable of hacking any person into pieces. Although we had heard this news on the BBC radio, but seeing the photograph and the news in the local newspaper gave us a rude shock. It was frightening to listen to our captors talking about the incident with a streak of sadistic pleasure and ruthlessness typical of seasoned criminals. We were helplessly watching their moods in acute fear but deep down in our heart of hearts we also were pitying over their lot. Meanwhile, Peer ordered all of us to get set to move to another hideout.

Omkar said to him: "Our case has become a very complicated one. Nobody seems to be bothering about us. On the one hand, the government is adamant and on the other your organisation is silent about our fate. I only see a very long dark tunnel before my eyes."

Latram Peer could sense sadness in Omkar's words.

"Don't worry, Dr. Sahib! You'll soon have a nice and free time. We'll soon cross over to Pakistan. This is our last village hideout near the border." Pointing his finger towards the window he added: "Look there. That is the Uri pass. We're not far away from the border."

"Do you mean to take us also across the border to Pakistan?", Omkar asked.

"Of course, what else? There you won't have to be hidden. You can move about freely. Besides, we can call a Press conference for you there. That will teach Indian Government a lesson", Peer boasted.

While he was saying all this, the other militants were feeling quite jubilant. Hearing these words left us in a strange painful stupor. Our hearts were filled with fear. Knowing the erratic ways of the militants now, and realizing their need for getting kicks out of such fantasies, we feared that they may land us into a grievous situation. It's an entirely different matter whether we should have ever crossed the border dead or alive, but their perverse pleasure in doing acts of this kind was quite vividly evident on their faces.

"We can't easily negotiate these hills here, how do you expect us to cross those peaks with difficult glaciers?", Kshema asked seriously.

"Why? We can hire ponies for you specially. Besides, we are with you. You needn't worry."

"When we do go across with them, it'll be great fun and terrible shame for India", Nassar added excitedly.

"We shall have to wait for a couple of days more. We may even dump them somewhere till we decide to take them across to Pakistan. Now it's not safe to move them from place to place like this", Peer said.

"What do you mean by dumping us? And where are you going to put us?", Kshema asked bewildered.

"Aunty, you don't worry about that. You'll be safe and sound there and you don't have to move everyday. We'll be saved from this botheration. You'll be provided every facility. In any case, soon we'll take you across", Peer said with such seriousness that it gave us chilling shivers.

We were told that our onward journey on foot was to be uphill, so we had to put on our shoes. It was a very dark night and not one human voice was heard anywhere. The rustling of leaves and the sounds of small gushing streams were however quite audible. Although the whole area was having electricity at its doorsteps, there wasn't even a flicker of light to be seen anywhere. It appeared to us that the militants had already arranged to put off the lights in the villages. Besides, Latram Peer didn't allow any torches to be lit which made traversing the path all the more difficult for us.

We finally reached a place where we were welcomed by the owner of the house and his pretty, ebullient daughter. His house was comparatively a modest one belonging to a typical middle class household. Although the house was newly built, much of it was still under construction. This is the typical Kashmiri way of constructing a house. The people first build the outer frame of a three storeyed house including the roof. Then they finish a couple of rooms and kitchen and start living in. The other rooms can then be done piecemeal over an extended period of time. Thereby, many houses remain even incompletely built for decades.

We were shown into a room on the first floor where we squatted. Peer made us sit comfortably and turning to the host said, "Dr. Sahib and aunty are strictly on vegetarian food these days. You need not also bother about us. We shall all have vegetarian food here."

"As you wish, we'll arrange accordingly. You please feel at home", the host said politely. After he said so, he began to wrap

up his papers and belongings which were lying around, and made room for us. Meanwhile, Peer had already shunted away two of the militants from the previous hideout, leaving a group of five militants including himself to be with us in this place.

When we were talking to the militants we could feel and see that Farooq was quite impressed by our free and frank interaction with the militants. He was therefore eager to come closer and have some sort of conversation with us. When he learnt that the others were addressing Omkar as Dr. Sahib, he had no doubt in his mind that Omkar was a physician. Gathering some sort of courage he began thus: "Both my feet are sore due to frost bite. I've applied some medicine but the healing is poor. I don't know what should I do with it, Dr. Sahib."

"Take off your socks, and let me have a look at your feet", Omkar asked him. Farooq carefully took off his socks, showing his feet to Omkar. His feet were terribly sore with chillblain wounds. The wounds were very raw and the feet were swollen. We were horrified and terribly distressed to see his feet because we suspected the worst that he may have gangrene, about which we had heard frightening stories. We had heard that the feet might have to be cut off if the disease was likely to spread. Omkar ordered him to wash his feet with hot water and potassium permanganate and not to use his dirty socks again. Farooq obeyed like a child. Then Omkar asked Ishaq and Javed to apply 'Ferrocine' ointment—which was in our first aid kit—to his wounds. We could see that with this kind of love and affection and effect of the medicine he felt relief from pain. Surely he's looking more cheerful thereafter.

Farooq was a youngman in his mid-twenties, possessing a serious disposition. He had a serious commitment to 'jihad' and militancy and had perhaps taken to it with utmost conviction. In fact, that was the reason why he had gone to Pakistan and spent eighteen months there. From Nassarullah we learnt that Farooq has learnt the latest techniques of guerrilla warfare in Pakistan

about which the militants were proudly talking amongst themselves. They were also making plans for their own advancement and training in these guerrilla tactics. Javed was indeed harping continuously, thereafter, on the tune of again going to Pakistan for training.

Next day when we woke up in the morning, Farooq cheerfully came to see us and promptly showed his feet to Omkar.

"See, Dr. Sahib. Your treatment has done a miracle. I feel much better today."

"Oh! very nice! The oozing has stopped. You've responded well to the medication", Omkar said with obvious satisfaction.

"Do I have to wash my feet again?"

"No, No. Don't do it now. Apply the medicine again for the day. In the evening wash them again the way you did yesterday", Omkar advised.

"Tell me, how did you get these chillblains?", Kshema asked him.

"I crossed the border only last week. I'd to walk for weeks on the glaciers. In between I lost my way. Thank God! At long last, I managed to reach back safely", Farooq said.

"Were you alone?", Kshema asked.

"No, we were three of us together. Only I've come back to this organisation. The other two have gone to Muslim Janbaz Force (MJF)", Farooq said.

"Are you happy now?", Omkar asked.

"No, I'm not happy at all. I've been looking forward to a well organised 'Jehad'. But what I've seen and heard here, only in these few days, had disappointed me. I'm disgusted!"

We could see that Farooq was being quite frank with us partly due to the fact that the other militants were friendly with us, and perhaps also due to the kind treatment he had received on his first encounter with us.

"What kind of 'Jehad' had you envisaged in your mind?", Omkar asked.

"Jehad means holy war. One has to be very pious, possess good character, be truthful, and totally devoted to achieving laudable goals. But, as soon as I set foot in the valley, all my hopes and ideals were shattered and vanished into the thin air."

"Why so? What happened?" Omkar asked with curiosity.

"In Pakistan we were dreaming that the militants and people here will welcome us with garlands of flowers. But we were disappointed to see that not a soul was stirred, our travail and ordeal notwithstanding. We even didn't get anything to eat. We'd suffered cramps in our tummy with hunger until somewhere we met the first group of militants. Before we had time to gather our wits, they pounced on us forcing us to get recruited into their respective outfits", Farooq reminisced.

"Which group are you talking about?", asked Nassar who was listening attentively.

"It was HM."

"How could you join them? Were you not sent by our organisation?", Ishaq asked.

"What organisation? What have they done to receive us back? Nobody wants us. They just want our guns and ammunition so that they can outdo the others by exhibiting their superior clout and strength in firearms", Farooq said.

"Who've taken those other two?"

Peer, who was listening to the conversation, now jumped into the fray to proclaim his being the 'ameer'.

"I told you, they're with MJF. But I don't think they'll come back", Farooq was a bit sore and cynical while he uttered these words.

"We know how to deal with such turn-coats. They can't get away like this. They're our responsibility", Peer said.

Farooq didn't respond to that. Instead, he looked at us, in such a way as if he was conveying:

'Do you want me to believe that this is 'Jehad', the 'Jehad' which I've always dreamt about?'

Chapter 13

Guddi or Goddess?

GUDDI was the name of host's daughter who was looking after the household chores including serving us tea and meals etc. Also, she would attend to all the outside chores like fetching water in pitchers gracefully poised on her head, washing clothes at the mallah, while her mother was perpetually sitting in front of the kitchen fires cooking meals for us and the family. Although the family was living in a far-flung area having poor communication with the city, yet every member of this family was quite sophisticated and modern in their behaviour and outlook. Everyone spoke and understood Urdu. Their manners also were quite refined and polished. During our talks with them we learnt that the host's mother hailed from Lahore in Pakistan who was married to a person from this village. He was no longer alive.

Guddi was bold, biosterous, possessing a good sense of humour, besides being very hard working. Both she and her brother were studying in college at Baramullah and were good at their studies. Guddi, her brother Reyaz and Javed were almost of the same age group and, therefore, they became well acquainted with each other. For most of the day Javed would nicely spend time with them in their kitchen. This was indeed resented by Latram Peer who wanted Javed to be more alert on his duty. On the other hand, Javed received fond motherly love from the hostess and, perhaps for once, felt the happiness and joy of a warm cozy family atmosphere. Often when Guddi would sit with us pouring out tea for all, she would very boldly question the militants about their misdeeds. Her mother would also join us during the day recounting to us many incidents of misbehaviour

and wrong-doing by the militants of various organisations. In fact, they emphasized that if militants wouldn't have stooped so low in taking revenge, they would have achieved their goal of independence long back. They were sore about the reality that now that goal seemed to be like a distant mirage.

During the course of our stay we talked about the freedom of Kashmiris, and in the process we realized that the militants were very vague about these matters partly because of their poor education and largely due to the indoctrination they were subjected to during their training in Pakistan. In one of his fits of frenzy Nassarullah chanted the Urdu song:

Islam ka parcham phailana hai;

Kashmir se Dilli tak jana hai.

Sub sarhadon ko mitana hai.

("We have to spread the flag of Islam far and wide. We have to go from Kashmir to Delhi. All boundaries have to be erased.")

"Tell me, what do you mean by erasing boundaries? Which boundaries you mean?", Kshema asked him.

"Boundaries are these mountains. We'll blast them and erase these mountains to make it a plain ground. Then we'll get lots of land and we'll settle Muslims from India on that land. This way we'll achieve one united Islamic world from Kashmir to Iran", Nassar said with such flourish that one felt that he was dead serious about it. We could hardly respond with words to these flights of his imagination. We only felt sorry about his living in this kind of a make-believe world.

"Who told you this kind of thing? Are you serious or you're just joking?", Omkar asked.

"Do you think that I'm always joking?"

Omkar didn't reply. Instead Nassar continued with his harangue on many such issues without knowing their head or tail. At this juncture even Ishaq and Farooq were feeling quite embarrassed and they asked him to shut his mouth. Omkar

intervened and said: "You should correct him. If he doesn't know about so many things, you ought to have taught him."

"Even we don't know about so many issues. We would like you to explain to us about these affairs", Ishaq requested.

When both of us started explaining to them the current world situation, they all sat around us as if it was a tutorial class in a school. Kshema picked up a large mirror from the window sill and made a map of Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India etc. of this region with a piece of charcoal from the 'kangri'.

"Do you know why the USA sent the ammunition to Pakistan? It was all meant to counter the action of USSR in Afghanistan. At that time USA felt that USSR was its greatest enemy. But now the situation has totally changed", Omkar said.

"But if Russia has taken away its troops from Afghanistan, why doesn't India take away its troops from Kashmir?", Ishaq asked.

"You see Afghanistan is an independent sovereign republic. The Russians were there at the request of the Government of Afghanistan. And Afghanistan is not a constituent state of Soviet Union. On the other hand, Kashmir is part of the Indian Union like so many other states."

"Why can't we join our Islamic brethren in Pakistan and Iran?", Nassar asked.

"You see, we cannot go on thinking only in terms of religion. Don't you remember what happened in Kuwait? It was a Muslim country invaded by Iraq, another Muslim country. What happened between Iraq and Iran? They fought for eight years and millions of young people were killed. Were those dead not Muslims? Why didn't Pakistan send troops to help Iraq, its Muslim brother? Instead they joined with USA and Saudi Arabia to fight Iraq", Omkar told them.

"We're angry with Pakistan about that blunder", Farooq said with concern.

"You may be angry. That's not enough. It's better to

understand these matters in a geographical, historical, and economic sense. Now see, those people who manufacture and sell arms, they want to make nations fight. Saddam Hussain destroyed Kuwait. Kuwait—helped by the world and USA—destroyed Iraq. Now these countries have to be rebuilt, and again provided with weapons. Who benefits from these activities? It's again the rich industrial nations. We're fooled because we fight over trivial issues."

"We also feel USA is not supporting Pakistan now. There's I feel some truth in what you say", Farooq said in a reflective mood.

"These advanced nations are guided mostly by their own economic and security needs. Europe, USA and the Soviet Union are coming closer together. They need the markets of our countries. Instead of coming closer we keep on fighting." As Omkar said this he showed them countries like Canada and USA on the map. He asked them and explained: "Have you ever heard USA and Canada fighting? No, never! They are close neighbours and share a long border like India and Pakistan. You can move about freely across the borders. They are happy and prosperous. We, on the other hand, are fighting and killing each other although we are closer to each other culturally and historically than the people living in Canada and USA."

"Even India and Pakistan can have the same kind of arrangement. That would be wonderful. The tension between these two countries will vanish in a jiffy. For that people in these countries should have tremendous cooperation and understanding", Kshema explained.

"We fail to see our advantages and are lost in trivial battles. There are lot of misconceptions in the minds of the people. Politicians also exploit the illiterate people and rouse them emotionally on religious or parochial issues. Now you have seen us for so many days. Have you seen any difference between you

and us? Don't we eat the same way, have the same dress and language, and same feelings as human beings?", Omkar said with emotion.

"The more we talk about these things the more confused and lost we feel", Ishaq observed.

"God has given us brains to understand these matters and ponder over these things. Animals don't think. Nobody expects them to use their brains", Kshema observed.

"For their own selfish goals, it's the leaders who go on preaching all sorts of things", Farooq said.

"Preaching does not matter. They only preach hatred instead of love. Thereby they create divisions amongst the people. I shouldn't call them leaders. They're destroyers", Kshema said.

"Yes, it's true. What they've been saying appears to be correct. You must all try to understand these issues in detail", Ishaq said this to his colleagues, giving the clear impression that he was sincerely applying his mind to a better understanding of the events.

During the course of these interactions Ishaq had developed a considerable interest in these dialogues. Amongst our captors he was the one who knew better Urdu and could read the local newspaper to all of us. Javed couldn't read Urdu. So we asked him to read the *Kashmir Times* for us which he did haltingly to begin with. Later, with our help he did it better. Nassar was also often watching these events and we would ask him to read and write in Urdu. At first he was not willing and felt diffident. However, when Omkar insisted, he wrote a page of his ideas in Urdu. We praised his work and within a short time he remembered his schooling and was confidently writing and reading Urdu whenever he was not listening to music or doing a militant's role.

We were sitting quietly in our room when the host's mother dropped in and sat beside Kshema. She was an epitome of love,

courtesy and good manners. When we talked to her we could easily perceive that it was her subtle influence that pervaded the whole family. Although she was a woman of few words yet her silence would convey so much more effectively.

"We feel really bad when you don't eat any meat and egg. We can't offer you a proper meal. Being in a village we don't even have the right kind of vegetables", the old lady began a conversation with Kshema showing her concern.

"We've had a very nice stay here. Food alone doesn't matter. Besides, we have had delicious food here", Kshema said.

"What's your routine during these fasts? How long do you observe this practice?", she asked Kshema.

"These are called days of 'Navratra' (nine nights). From the first to the ninth day we don't touch meat or egg at all. Men also observe fasts on these nine days", Kshema explained.

"You're also observing a sort of fast. You've been eating only one meal here. What things do you eat during these days?", the lady enquired inquisitively.

"We do have 'kheer' (rice pudding), 'halwa' (semolina pudding), and 'paneer' (cottage cheese) etc. during these days", Kshema said.

When she heard about 'halwa' she became much interested and asked Kshema: "Do you prepare it the way we do? We also make this here." Then she explained the preparation to Kshema and learnt that they were talking about the same recipe. Thereupon, the old lady narrated the events about her life and about the family. She was going to town soon in connection with the marriage of her relation. This brought up the topic of marriage customs etc. about which she talked at length. Talking about her past, she naturally had nostalgic memories about the good days she had in her childhood before the partition of the sub-continent. She mentioned that she hadn't visited that country again ever since she was married. The old lady took leave of us because

Guddi called her out to meet a guest who was in the kitchen.

Soon thereafter, we came to know that the family's guest was a saintly person who was talking to the family members in the kitchen. Javed was also sitting with them. Kshema got curious to meet the 'darwaish' and as she started to move into the kitchen Ishaq and Nassar also followed her there apparently to keep an eye on her movements. Omkar also wanted to meet him but he hesitated and stayed back in his place.

The 'darwaish' was an old man with a truly saintly aura visible on his face. He was chanting some verses from the holy Quran. As Kshema entered the kitchen she felt attracted to the 'darwaish'. He was blessing each and every person who were sitting huddled around him there. Javed took out his hand and showed it to him saying: "Baba, please see what is ordained by my fate?"

"Allah is with you. He'll protect you. He is the benevolent father of us all, Master of the Universe. Pray to Him and He'll care for you. He looks after all of us."

Kshema kept quiet and watched the 'darwaish' concentrating her gaze on him with folded hands. Suddenly he gave her a warm and benevolent look and said: "In two days time you'll blossom as in spring (this is the literal translation of what he said to her in Kashmiri). Get a black thread dear. I'll make a talisman for you."

Meanwhile, Guddi went out from the kitchen and returned with black thread. The saint made a round-shaped talisman out of the thread. As he was weaving the talisman he was chanting some Quranic verses followed by the words 'Allah-o-Akbar' (God's great) at each pause. Then he gave this talisman alongwith some pieces of candy sugar to Kshema and said: "Keep it with you. Wear it. All your worries and travails will vanish." To emphasize his blessings he puffed out air forcefully from his mouth and moved his head in a gesture of shooing away the evil forces.

Meanwhile Ishaq came closer to the saint and put forth his

hand before him and asked: "Baba! Please tell us when are we going to gain freedom? How long will it take?"

" 'Azadi'! Ha! Ha! It's within your hearts. Freedom is right there inside you. Why are you searching for it outside?"

On hearing this, Kshema could sense Ishaq and Javed were quite disappointed. Therefore, they didn't venture to ask him any further questions. When the saint left, Kshema, Javed, and Ishaq enquired from the hostess: "How well known is this saint? Is he a good one?"

"Yes, he's been coming here for years. He's a very pious person with a long record of religious penance."

Kshema returned to the room, narrated the event and we ate the candy sugar given by the saint in a gesture of gratefulness to God Almighty. "This is indeed real 'prasadam' (God's gift)", Omkar said.

That day we were offered a truly delicious meal alongwith specially prepared 'paneer' (cottage cheese) which was beautifully in consonance with the occasion being the eighth day of 'Navratra' better known as 'Durga Ashtami'. We felt thankful to God Almighty for His graciousness. Also we were grateful to the host family for their concern, consideration and love with which they had thoughtfully prepared the meals specially for us on this day. Every little event that happened on that day was associated by us with our sincere prayers. We considered these as good omens which gave us inner joy at that moment.

In the afternoon a young lad from the village came and sat quietly in our room. He was a classfellow of the householder's children. As he looked straight at us from the other end of the room, Omkar thought that he was a promising young lad. He asked him to get his books and talk about his work. The lad had just entered college. Promptly he returned with his books and started off doing the assignment given to him by Omkar. It was amazing to see such a brilliant young boy in a far off village,

which delighted us. He had deficiencies in some subjects which were clarified by Omkar who spent some time teaching him. He was grateful for these helpful tips. He also wrote a beautiful essay in Urdu as well as English in which he expressed his gratitude to us in sweet, innocent, and moving words. Although the language had to be corrected in both the essays, the ideas were excellent and his handwriting in Urdu was meticulously neat and good. He left our room delighted and satisfied, making a promise that he'll carry on with his studies in the manner taught by Omkar.

In the meantime, the host's son and his cousin had gone out with Javed into the forest nearby to manually bring home large beams of sawn timber on their backs. When they came back after doing this work, Kshema asked Gulzar (this was given as name of householder's nephew): "Have you finished the task? Has Javed been of much help?"

"Well, he tried to do his best as far as he could but these militants are only good with their guns. They can't fetch heavy loads. When he was carrying one of the beams he's panting for breath. He's no energy for this kind of work", Gulzar replied rather amused.

Before he'd finished his sentence Javed was quick to intervene: "It's a matter of practice. After a couple of days I can also pick up loads like him." He was trying to show that he was equally proficient and not idling away time. He was also seeking our appreciation in a subtle way.

"Look at Gulzar's face. He looks quite fresh and healthy because he works hard to earn his meals, whereas you're smoking continuously and blowing like a chimney. I'm sure your windpipe must be fully covered with soot. Reyaz and Gulzar! I tell you, you should make him work and toil so that he forgets about his cigarettes for some time", Kshema exhorted.

"I didn't smoke today. See, my packet is half full", Javed said while showing his packet of cigarettes to us.

"Look at your face. You look quite fresh this time because you have had some exercise in fresh air. You should keep it up."

Later when Latram Peer came back after his day's work he appeared relaxed and in a jolly good mood. He told us: **"Don't you think this is a good place here for us to stay on until we hear further from our organisation? But, I feel rather reluctant to do so because of the burden on the host family. They've to feed and serve so many of us. What do you suggest?"**

We knew that by this time our captors had absolute confidence in us, so much so that they would seek our guidance in routine day-to-day affairs.

"I don't think there is any harm if you talk to the host frankly about it. In fact, you should pay them for the day-to-day expenses", Kshema suggested a way out.

"Your suggestion is good. That'll give us some respite. Apart from money, we can bring them some rice, oil and ration etc. We don't want to put you into discomfort every day. Besides, these people are good and we're comfortable here", Latram explained his views.

"I think it's better to clinch the matter now so that all of us can be at ease for as long as we are destined to be with you in these circumstances", Omkar added.

Javed was asked by Peer to call the host and his wife to our room so that the matter could be discussed. When they heard about this proposal, they were quite embarrassed and in a low voice they said: **"Whatever we have, we'll share with you. We may not be able to satisfactorily serve you, but you need not worry about the provisions. Allah has given us enough. Stay on as long as you must. When our provisions are exhausted, we'll let you know."**

Latram was very happy to hear these words and so were we. For once, we would be spared the ordeal of moving from place to place when we could never be sure about the kind of home we

would be landing into. Soon the host and his wife left the room. The host handed over to Omkar a pamphlet about the Uri Hydrel project. While Omkar busied himself with seeing the photographs in the pamphlet, the militants engaged in a conversation amongst themselves.

Our attention was suddenly caught when Ishaq was arguing rather emotionally with Latram Peer.

"How do you justify the killing of that person? I know he wasn't a 'mukhabir' (enemy's informer). He's quite innocent."

"No, No. He's a 'mukhabir'. He'd revealed some secret information to our enemies", Peer emphasized his words. When Ishaq heard this, he got into a rage and retorted: "I knew the person well. He's absolutely innocent. I know how and who got him murdered for his own personal ends. God will never forgive such a deed. It was a treacherous act."

"You don't have to talk like that. The orders of our 'ameer' are absolute and binding and we've to execute these without questioning", Peer said.

"Even if the order is wrong? You say, we've to obey them?", Ishaq challenged.

"Of course, we've to!"

"No, God has given us sense. We don't have to. We should know the difference between good and bad. Do you have any idea why he's killed?", Ishaq said forcefully.

Peer looked at Ishaq with dazed and helpless eyes. Both of us intervened and asked curiously: "If you're so sure he was innocent, then why was he killed?"

"He's got killed by his enemy, a well-off and influential person who paid money to the militants to get rid of this man." While uttering these words, not only Ishaq, but all of us felt sad. Ishaq's voice choked with emotion while he described in detail the scene of that late night event, saying: "First they called him over for dinner. Later he was taken out of the house on some

pretext, and was shot dead in cold blood in the field nearby.”

This event, narrated by Ishaq, gave us a rude shock and we shuddered to think about our own uncertain fate at their hands.

“This is only one of those tragic events. But I have heard about many other similar cases soon after my arrival from across the border. I wonder what this ‘Jehad’ is all about”, Farooq said with evident sadness. Peer was rendered absolutely silent and reflective while he quietly kept on puffing at his cigarette.

Later, as usual, we went to the other room for retiring to bed. Guddi went to get a cup of tea for Kshema who was having her fast. When she returned to the room with two cups of tea a young militant, who appeared to be known to the householders, also entered the room alongwith her. This person had earlier come to this house during the day, and had introduced himself as a militant, belonging to the MJF. He was a smart youngman, well dressed in denim jeans and a colourful jacket. Also he was brandishing his revolver like a juggler in a juggernaut. With his quick wit and sense of humour, he was wanting to attract everybody’s attention towards him.

When Latram Peer saw him suddenly intrude into our bedroom, he felt jittery because of the fear of exposure. Guddi handed over a cup of tea to Kshema and another one to this youngman, who accepted it hesitatingly.

“Come on, Bhai Saheb! You need this cup of tea after having a hectic day”, Guddi was mocking at him and taking some liberties.

“Am I only going to have tea?”, he asked.

“I’m giving you company”, Kshema said.

Latram Peer questioned the youngman about his organisation and other details probing into his antecedents.

As soon as Guddi and the young militant left the room, all of a sudden, Latram Peer got out of his bed and ordered all of us to get ready for moving out of this place. We were alarmed.

“Nassar, you go upstairs and wake up Javed, be quick. We don’t lose time”, Peer ordered.

Reluctantly and cursing our lot, we finally got up at this late hour of the night to get ready for our move. Javed had, in the meantime, come down and entered our room alongwith the host and his entire family. They had been rather worried and frightened by the snap decision taken by Peer in this manner. The host was bewildered and so were other members of his family. But Guddi had kept her cool and in a patronizing tone, she addressed Peer with these words:

“I don’t know why you’ve suddenly decided to leave like this. What made you think this way? There’s nothing wrong here. Nobody is going to expose you. This is the safest place for you.”

“I’m sure this boy will never divulge anything. We know him rather well. You need not worry on that account. Why are you giving these guests unnecessary trouble”, the host added to what Guddi had said, trying to convince Peer. Peer seemed to be in a fix, not being sure what he should decide. He lit a cigarette and pondered over the tricky problem. Guddi came near to Peer and pushed him into his bed, throwing the quilt over him and said: “Won’t you now go to sleep and stop thinking too much?”

Peer was amused by her innocent ways and overwhelmed by her gesture, he helplessly succumbed to stay put in the house.

“Yes, Peer Sahib, we should stay here today. She’s correct. Where shall we go so late in the night?”, Kshema said.

“Okay then! Let’s stay here. This is Allah’s wish”, Peer said leaving the decision to Allah’s will.

Guddi’s intervention, dominated by her charming persuasive ways, had saved the day for us. It was at this moment that we appreciated her presence of mind and quick wit about which she had earlier talked to us. She had complained that most villagers thought of her as being too clever. This was said by them more by way of giving her a left-handed compliment arising from

jealousy. We had reassured her though, that she was a wonderful person. And, indeed, we were delighted to meet such a hardworking, educated, upright, outspoken, and charming young girl in this remote hilly village of this beautiful valley. We simply loved her for her innocent and creative ways. She was our goddess!

Chapter 14

Allah-o-Akbar

OMKAR woke up early morning in a very happy mood because the memory of a beautiful dream he'd had was still lingering in his mind. He was so excited about this dream that he immediately narrated it to Kshema in the presence of all the militants.

"I saw myself seated on the steps of the shrine of Makhdoom Sahib in Srinagar. The entire flight of steps was illuminated by innumerable oil lamps of clay. There were lots of people—moving about to and fro in the shrine—who were congratulating me and virtually chanting the word 'Mubarak'! (hearty greetings) 'Mubarak'! Even now those loud words are ringing in my ears", Omkar said.

As Omkar narrated the dream, Latram Peer instantaneously exclaimed: "This's a very good omen. Insha Allah! I'm sure you'll be released soon. I must hurry up to make contact with the channel and see what progress they've made in this matter. You never know, they might already have reached some agreement with the government."

"I've also had a dream today. I saw myself in my home at Buchwara where Javed comes to meet me fully dressed in a military uniform, wearing two stars on his shoulder band. As he approached my house, I came out to meet him and hugged him warmly for being immensely pleased to see him in this attire."

When Kshema narrated her dream, Javed was obviously very much thrilled to hear it, but the others didn't take much notice of this. Javed couldn't however help pouring out his heart.

"Could it come true some day? How I wish to see that dream of yours as a reality!" He sighed as he said so.

"It's surely possible. But for that, you've to continue your studies", Kshema replied, impressing upon him the need for proper development.

"In that case, I want to become your personal bodyguard", Javed said with a smile.

"Do I need to have bodyguards all my life to protect me from militants?" While Kshema said this everyone had a hearty laugh.

No sooner did we finish our breakfast, than Peer suddenly got up to get down to work again.

"I must get going now. Farooq, you too get ready. You'll help me to bring the rations and the anti-aircraft gun. Nassar, you get up, and arrange the ponies for this task", Peer ordered.

"Anti-aircraft gun? What do you want it for?" Omkar asked. We'd been taken by surprise at the mention and presence of such armament.

"Now that we've got it, why shouldn't we keep it with us? Anytime we may need it", Peer said.

"How come! Wherefrom did you suddenly get it? We haven't heard about this before?", Kshema enquired.

"These have been sent by Pakistan to all organisations. Ours has got one. I'd rather like to keep it with me. Others may not take proper care of this equipment", Peer explained.

"Peer Sahib, you may get it here. But, I assure you that there won't be any air raid. You'll only be creating unnecessary botheration and headache for yourself", Omkar said. When we were talking about this the other militants were very curious to have a firsthand acquaintance with this new weapon. One of them said:

"If it has to be dumped somewhere anyway, why not with us? Besides it'll be in safer hands."

"We can make good use of this from top of this hill. It'll bring wonderful results", added another militant.

Latram didn't make any further comments. He left the house

with Farooq and Nassar, turned around for a while and said: "Nassar will back soon. He'll get your quota of cigarettes and help me with the ponies. But Farooq will proceed with me because I've to assign him some other important work." Saying this he also winked meaningfully towards the other militants. We immediately understood that Peer was rightaway eliminating Farooq from the team.

During the day Omkar was quite engrossed with the study, under bright sunlight, of the pamphlet on the Uri Hydel Project on which he had laid his hands earlier. The militants also were quite curious to know the benefits of this project. In fact, they were attracted to see the beautiful pictures in the pamphlet and wanted to understand more about this scheme. Like a good teacher Omkar began to explain, step by step, all the details of the power project to the militants as well as Gulzar and Reyaz. He showed them the main features of the scheme explaining how electricity will be generated in an underground powerhouse to which water will be diverted through the rock. Omkar explained to them the multiple benefits of the scheme which would also generate tremendous potential for employment in the region.

"Things would have been far better and many youth would've benefited if there were no turmoil in the area. See how much damage has been done", Omkar sighed while explaining the matter.

"How is it that they have resumed construction work again, when there is this dispute going on?", Ishaq asked knowingly.

"What dispute are you talking about? You see, many foreign firms of Sweden and UK have opted to work for the project. Do you think they would have done so if there would have been any doubts? See this for yourself, Javed, you can read it here. Aren't these international contractors?", Omkar asked.

They perused the pamphlet carefully again and Javed nodded his head in agreement with what Omkar had said. On seeing their

reaction, Omkar continued: "On the one hand, Pakistan is instigating and arming you; on the other hand recently they've had a meeting on Tulbul Weir (Wullar barrage) at Islamabad. They've agreed to let the construction be resumed. Do you understand what this means? Don't think that Pakistan has done it just to please anyone. But they are under international pressure to sort out expeditiously all pending issues with India", Omkar explained.

"It's a game of treachery. Everybody is for himself. Don't you think, Dr. Saheb, that we've been crushed in between?", Ishaq lamented.

"Yes, of course! That's what we've been telling you all through. Haven't you heard over the radio the other day, that American Naval Chief in the Pacific Ocean made important contact with the Indian Naval Chief. The USA has a different attitude now to defence and other concerns in this region. That affects all of us in these countries. You should realize that no country is nowadays able to act without the consent of great powers. Sweden and UK firms have resumed work at Uri because they know the mind of USA", Omkar clarified.

"What about this article 370? What does this really mean?", Nassar asked this question in order to show that he too doesn't lag behind in showing interest about these serious issues.

"Article 370 gives special status to the Jammu and Kashmir State. Among other things, we have by this article been able to restrict the purchase of immovable property in the state by persons other than those belonging to the state", Kshema explained.

"If Article 370 were not there any rich business man would have purchased the whole of Kashmir leaving nothing for us", Nassar added.

"The article will remain as such", Ishaq said looking at us and wanting to see our response to his statement.

"Yes, of course. It's a must", we told them.

Our host had a very painful boil on his thigh which had been suppurating for a few days. He had excruciating pain which nearly immobilized him. It was amazing to notice however, that inspite of such disability, he showed us all the courtesy and care as his own guests and looked after our needs with love and genuine concern. He'd occasionally pop into our room, chat for a while and then retire back to his room for rest. In his presence there were a few conversations about culture of the Kashmiris and our heritage. In this context the names of Jawahar Lal Nehru, Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah and Sir Mohammed Iqbal came up. The host was very proud of the fact that Kashmiris are very intelligent people and many of them had made a mark in the world in different fields. All of us agreed that Iqbal, Nehru and Abdullah were very proud of their ancestry and heritage and boasted about it in their many speeches and writings. His wife also joined in our talks sometimes.

In the course of one such conversation she narrated an incident which had occurred sometime back, and involved her son with the militants.

"Reyaz was very good in his studies and sports activities. Once he got the first prize in the school. His rival students, who had acquired a pistol from someone, hit him with a bullet on his leg. After wounding him thus, they took him along for a couple of days for treatment of his wounds. When we finally saw him back at home, nobody told us the truth. They had also warned him not to speak about the incident. When his wound didn't heal for some time, we took him to the hospital at Baramullah. There he was operated upon and to our horror we discovered that a bullet was extracted from his wound."

"Until then, you didn't really know what had happened?", Ksherna asked her in surprise.

"How could we know? It's a deep wound and we didn't have

a clue. Thank God! he's been saved. It's a miracle of God", the hostess clarified.

"It's so tragic that personal rivalries dominate our actions", Javed said.

"You see, later on we heard that the boy, who wounded our son, had borrowed the pistol from a militant — who was his acquaintance — solely for the purpose of doing this evil deed!"

When she narrated this story, their nephew, Gulzar, who was sitting beside them jumped up and said: "If these people give me their gun only for two hours, I've to settle scores with someone. But they don't trust me. They think that I'll take away their gun and never show them my face again "

Gulzar's apparently non-serious remark relaxed the whole atmosphere and we laughed it over.

The host and hostess were very keen to know about our children. When we talked about them, they were quite sad to contemplate their plight while we were in captivity. They expressed a lot of concern for their welfare especially when we told them that our daughter who was at that time in USA was in the family way and in fact about to deliver a baby. Also we had told them that we were planning to go to USA. They would pray for the welfare of our children, particularly for the daughter who was going through a delicate phase. They would pray for our immediate release from captivity so that we could meet our children soon. The Kashmiris have very tender feelings for a pregnant young daughter. In particular, the relationship of the mothers and daughters in this respect is very tender indeed. These ethnic attitudes pervade amongst the entire population in town and village. We observed similar good feelings of the hosts almost everywhere.

Peer didn't return to the house till late in the evening and the militants got restless. Although, Peer had indicated that he may take a longer time or have to stay out for the night, yet his colleagues were not certain about his programme. He had also

cautioned them to be careful in guarding the house from outside during the night by taking turns as usual. As it happened, he didn't at all turn up for the night, leaving us to our fate with his three colleagues Nassar, Javed and Ishaq.

We had a delightful surprise that late evening, when Guddi came to our room with tray full of hot aromatic 'halwa' (semolina pudding) freshly prepared from the most natural and home made 'ghee' (butter) along with lots of dry fruit viz. coconut, raisins and saffron etc. The room was filled with its aroma. Instantaneously we thought of this delicacy as a 'prasadam' (God's gift) from goddess mother on this auspicious day of Ram Navmi. We looked upon this 'prasadam' as a sort of reward by goddess for our nine-day long prayers to her. We ate the 'halwa' with a relish never experienced by us earlier, as if we have never had such a delicacy in our lives before. While we ate, we were mentally transported to the holy shrine of Kheerbhawani in south-west Kashmir, where we felt goddess mother herself was serving us. The militants also relished this treat heartily.

With our hearts filled with indescribable joy, we had a deep sound sleep that night, which we had not experienced ever before during our captivity.

As usual during the night, Ishaq was on guard duty outside the house. When his duty ended perhaps at about midnight, he entered into our room and began to wake up Nassar for taking up guard duty for the remaining part of the night. It took Ishaq quite some time and effort to wake up Nassar who was also in deep slumber. We got disturbed by their conversation. Nassar was showing great reluctance to go out for duty and in an irritated voice told Ishaq: "You go and sleep. Don't disturb me. I'll go outside and do my duty." While saying this, Nassar rolled the quilt over his head and slept cozily and nicely again. After they stopped talking we also felt asleep again and couldn't take any more notice of this event.

At about 5.30 a.m. in the morning, in the most unexpected and unpredictable fashion, a lady from a neighbouring house knocked at our door. She was panic-stricken, desperate, and shrieking when she told us that the army had surrounded the whole area and that we were now going to die. We don't know how we woke up and rushed out of our beds. The suddenness of the news about the army's encirclement of the village gave us strange kind of intense feelings. These were mixed feelings of relief, fear and panic. Both of us felt some lumps of heavy weight on our bodies. Mechanically, we laid our hands on our shoes and clothes and wore whatever we could in that hurry and panic, while the militants and householders were desperately shoosing us out of the house.

In the meanwhile the whole family was busy in a flurry of activities removing each and every evidence or trace of our stay from every nook and corner of the house. They were working like honeybees — going up and down, and consumed by deep fear — to remove each mark of our stay. When we were about to leave, Guddi and her mother hugged Kshema and said: "Take care of yourself, aunty, Allah will protect you! We don't know what is going to happen to all of us." Tears were rolling down their eyes as they said these parting words. We were too dazed to be able to respond with words or say anything at that time. We were in a terribly fearful and nervous condition.

With no moment lost thereafter, we were directed by the militants to run away from the house towards the hilly terrain nearby. They were following us and virtually dragging us around in trying to make good their escape out of the army cordon. They could not however find any opening for such escape from the hilly terrain.

Therefore, they dragged us towards a ravine. A small stream was flowing through the ravine and there were a number of pine trees hiding our view from the open fields lower down. Looking

through these trees we could easily see the movement of the army, whereas we believed that they were perhaps not able to locate our position or observe our movements. The militants were extremely frustrated by the fact that the whole area was cordoned by the army. They attempted to separate us and put Kshema inside a house while they would carry Omkar with them. This, they thought, would help them to escape the trap. We decided however to hold together firmly, come what may. And we let this be known to them as well. With God's grace we stuck together to the last.

In extreme desperation they were now all set to retaliate and face the challenge of the army. Now was the time, they thought, to take action and carry out a full-fledged 'Jehad' against the military whom they considered their arch enemy. They were brought up to believe that they would become real 'shaheeds' (martyrs) if only they died in battle killing ten or twenty people of the enemy before laying down their own lives.

When they began to take positions behind the rocky stones to simulate bunkers with their two AK-47 guns and one light machine gun, Javed enquired nervously "How many rounds of ammunition do we have?"

"Ammunition for three hours", Ishaq replied.

Sensing the terrible calamity that was about to befall us, Omkar suddenly came out of his stupor and began to plead with the militants not to use any arms as we all would be massacred. Then he involuntarily took off his cap and put it at the feet of the militants: "I'm your elder, like your father. Try to understand what you are up against. You don't know the repercussions of the whole thing. I beg you not to use the gun. Your lives are precious. We don't want to see you dead in this manner."

We could feel Ishaq and Nassar were somewhat moved by the earnest appeal made to them by Omkar. But Javed was adamant and said: "I've to die. We'll give them a fight. If Peer would have been here we'd have started action."

"Javed, have patience. Don't take a hasty step. Think about the villagers", Omkar warned him. At the same time he signalled Kshema to tackle Javed.

"Let's go inside this house. We may be seen here by the army", Kshema said to them in a frenzy.

In this panicky situation we ran all together towards a nearby house and rushed inside. Realizing that Ishaq and Nassar had already begun to obey Omkar, and were inclined to give up the fight, Omkar told Kshema in a whisper as they were entering the house: "He's a hard nut to crack. You do something about him", he said pointing towards Javed. Mechanically we banged open the door of a nearby room to make an entry there. Straight in front of the door, we found an old man chanting verses in Urdu from the holy Quran. He was squatting on a sheepskin and wore a nice dignified headgear. Omkar went straight in front of him and bowed. Then we squatted on one side of the room alongwith Javed. The old man was so absorbed in his morning prayers, he didn't even notice us!

"What are you upto Javed? Don't you realize what catastrophe you're creating. I can understand your 'Jehad'. Even I'm ready to die. But what have these poor innocent villagers done. Are we so ungrateful to these people, who have fed us, served us so well, and given us shelter? Is this Guddi's age to die? Do Gulzar and Reyaz deserve to perish in this fight? What about these small children? Are we going to turn this village into a graveyard?" When Kshema said these words she was in tears.

Seeing a stern look on Javed's face she exclaimed: "Okay then! If you're so determined to fight, pierce your first bullet through my heart. Then you'll be free to do whatever you want." While saying this Kshema was sitting straight in front of him with her arms wide open.

These words, obviously, intensely moved Javed. Lo and behold! he hugged Kshema, put his head straight into her lap and

sobbed like a child saying: "I'm finished. I'm going to die. I'm not going to live. I feel totally empty and emaciated."

Kshema stroked his back and said: "You're young and you'll live long." Her tears fell on his face. We could feel that both Nassar and Ishaq were relieved and we asked them to throw away their weapons immediately. In a hurry, they began to hide their weapons in this very household. Then the lady of the house came in, her face was having a death like-palour, she was uttering fearful sounds in a trembling voice: "Is this okay? Is this okay? They're going to keep their guns here?" Sensing her plight Omkar ordered the two of them to take away their weapons and throw them away somewhere outside the house. They obeyed instantly and went out of the house never again to be seen by us thereafter.

Kshema ordered Javed to change his hairstyle and put on a 'pheran' which was hanging from a peg on the wall behind him. Javed obeyed and moving about like a robot did what he was told to do.

Meanwhile the army was announcing commands from loudspeakers and asking the village males to come out of their homes and assemble in the field nearby. They were probably preparing for a crackdown and house to house search of the area. As Javed got dressed like a village lad, he somehow wanted to stick with us. He pleaded: "You must please tell the army that I'm your son."

"How foolish you're? Do you think that they will believe us? You're going to put yourself into trouble. Why don't you go and move about with Ishaq and Nassar?, we told him.

Thereupon without arguing any further, Javed left us alone and went away on his own. We heaved a sigh of relief.

While this drama of life and death was going on inside the room, the old holy man, still unaware of the goings on, peacefully continued chanting aloud verses from the holy Quran. He read:

"Whatever God does, He does for the best. He alone knows

the Truth. We must have faith and trust in Him alone. He is the most benevolent and merciful. Nothing can happen without His wish." The words had the miraculous power of nectar.

Immediately after Javed left, the landlady and her husband, who were quite obviously happy and relieved, offered us to share a cup of tea in their nearby kitchen. At this juncture we didn't naturally want to waste a single moment, and we were still full of apprehensions, anxiety and fear. Our mouths were dry and tongues tasting bitter. But in order not to hurt their feelings, we agreed to have a few sips of tea with them.

"God has sent you here in our humble home just to take a few sips of tea. His ways are unique. If I'm not wrong, you are the Wakhlus?", he said.

"Maybe, we were held up for having these few sips. Yes, you guessed right", we said and took leave to quickly move out of the house.

Meanwhile the army had zeroed in around the village. Indeed, by this time they were now only a few yards away from this house. As we saw the soldiers nearby, we raised our hands up lest they may mistake us for militants, because we were fully dressed as Kashmiri villagers and moving suspiciously.

"Where is your officer?" Omkar shouted at the soldiers, who were taken by surprise and looked rather nervous and also amazed at our behaviour. As they came closer to us we again shouted: "Call your officer. We want to talk to him. We are keeping our hands up. Don't you see. You are looking for us."

Immediately thereafter, we were surrounded by the soldiers and some officer came along to speak to us. When we disclosed our identity he was jubilant and immediately talked to his superior officer on his walkie-talkie set.

"Sir, it's our Tika Day today. Goddess mother has given us a great gift on this auspicious day."

The army took care of us and made a lot of fuss about our

health. We spent a quiet couple of hours waiting for a helicopter which would fly us back to Srinagar. The Brigadier and Major incharge of the operations were introduced to us by the Captain of the regiment. Omkar explained to them how we had been captured unharmed by their men. He pleaded with the Brigadier: "With God's grace your mission has been accomplished. The villagers have shown a very high appreciation of the Army throughout these days. These villagers are innocent. Please treat them kindly."

"Did the people help the militants?", the Brigadier asked.

"Not at all. On the other hand, they are fed up. But they are afraid of ruthless killing by the militants. The people are very good. They deserve lot of empathy and you can provide that, I think", Omkar explained.

"Where have your captors gone?", enquired the Major.

"They've left us alone after we pleaded with them. They need to be dealt with care, you see", Kshema explained. "That will be good in the larger interest. I request you earnestly to keep that in mind. We have to begin with healing of hearts", Omkar added.

The Brigadier and his officers listened to us attentively. Meanwhile hot tea was served to us and for once we relished it with a strange feeling of joy in our hearts.

While we waited quietly for the helicopter to arrive, Kshema reminisced about the dream she had many months earlier, in which she had seen herself moving with the militants throughout the valley disguised in a veil, much in the manner that had actually taken place. She hadn't an iota of an idea then that this dream would come about in this traumatic manner. Reflecting on these matters we could not but wonder over the unique ways of Nature.

During our flight in the helicopter, we also remembered the prophetic words of Guddi's father who had sincerely wished and

prayed for our rescue from captivity from his house in this very village. These words were ringing clear and loud in our ears. We had a feeling of deep gratitude to God Almighty—for His Grace and Mercy—in making this bloodless and peaceful rescue possible in this dramatic manner. It was one of the loveliest miracles of God we've ever experienced. God is really Great! Allah-o-Akbar!

Chapter 15

What I Learnt from the Abduction Crisis?

ARUN WAKHLU

I see life as a fascinating learning process. Every event and situation, no matter how difficult, has been placed before us by Existence to help us grow towards greater fullness and joy. With its multiple twists and turns of events and fortune it is egging the ego on to see that its own existence is much like the bubble on water, a part of the whole, a small drop in the larger ocean.

Some events in life give us a clearer insight into these things. It is almost as if a window into a deeper mystery has been opened up for a short while to give us a tantalizing glimpse of how things are. . . a short “trailer” before the window slams shut once again. The glimpse, however, never leaves you the same again.

The abduction of my parents by militants on September 4, 1991 was one such watershed in my life. What I’m sharing is what I learnt from it. In this sharing you might find something which resonates with your own life and understanding.

Individual and Collective *Karma*

We are all connected. So are events. Our life unfolds like a tapestry of processes deeply connected with those of others. I was in Jamshedpur on the 5th of September 1991, all set to facilitate a Team Building Workshop for TISCO. In the morning we hear the news. On the 6th we are in Delhi, where a very different kind of Team-Building started unfolding. Man’s disappointment is God’s appointment.

I tracked back through memory to see the linkages. Could I

have done something to prevent what happened? If many of us had acted more responsibly earlier on, would this all have happened? Who knows. Life is too complex to understand, but one couldn't help wondering. The unfolding of individual evolution (i.e. individual purification) has its collective counterpart. Our destinies are linked. They have built-in learning value aimed at ultimately melting down any kind of ego to yield to the Divine Flow. Each event is a movement in this direction. The more we are *connected* to each other, the more we learn together and unfold in love together.

The 'Flow' State

As a Management Consultant I have often thought about the conditions that make for highly productive work. One of the ideas in my mind has been that work done without the ego is the true source of productive action. Without the blocking/interfering influence of the 'ego' things flow of their own accord. It is almost as if Fullness and Love overflow in work (FLOW!).

This crisis gave me an opportunity to experience this mode of working. The sudden confrontation with an extraordinary event, that literally yanked one's attention away from petty concerns, created the base for what was to follow.

When one examines dispassionately how life works, its million interconnections, interdependencies, it becomes impossible to say '*I did this*'. It is a totally false notion! For even the smallest things there are so many processes and people at work that one is at a total loss to define the boundary saying 'I'. In this crisis, hundreds of people have done hundreds and thousands of things. A vast network of *people, resources, thoughts, ideas, prayers* has been at work, besides a deep silence, a deep core of positivity and faith. Every bit adds up. . . has some impact somewhere. . . no matter how small. So seeing this, one becomes humiliated . . . made humble in a very positive way, ego-dissolving way. . . and

aligned with and dissolved away in the mighty ocean of life with its surges and waves and tides and storms. A deep gratitude arises . . . a quiet certitude that all is well and will always be in His Knowing Hands.

Staying OK, (through extra doses of Meditation!) infects others with the same OK optimism

We stayed positive right through the whole drama except for some heavy moments in the first 2-3 days. This helped to lift others also out of their tears and gloom creating a positive optimism that all would be well.

Being Active, Doing Something now, keeps me centered

In times like this, when one is flowing in action, there is no problem because one is always in the Here-Now where action is. The moment you come out of the Here-Now and get into imagining/expecting/hoping, the energy level goes down and you feel drained/tired.

There were far too many 'coincidences' in our movements in Delhi to say, we did it all. Given what was said above, it is impossible to say that anyhow. Still, the uncanny timings of things, the timely help e.g. the very important meeting with the Prime Minister, the timely call to Gary Saxena, Pramodeji's guidance etc. assures me that Divine Intelligence is far superior to man's limited egoistic understanding. To align with and flow with this movement is the highest wisdom. It's the most optimal path. Things we never could even conceive a few months ago were set into motion by this drama. I have learnt to submit to the wisdom of the unfolding *leela* and trust in its movements like a child in the arms of his mother. I have also learnt that this trusting flow can be very active, and very dynamic. . . in fact we were working from 8 in the morning to 11 p.m. on some days . . . moving about from one office to another. But deep down, there was a silent, peaceful, non-doing centre . . . actionless action!

Human Goodness

One thing which I found deeply touching in this entire drama was to see the incredible fund of goodwill which began operating once the crisis got going. In Srinagar, Delhi, Pune, Jamshedpur, Bombay . . . people who knew us or were in some ways connected, started moving constructively. A whole network of positive linkages came alive. Many relatives, neighbours, friends, and acquaintances came forward to help. It was such a shock for me to see how much I took this rich human interdependence for granted. It cut across religions, across geographical boundaries, across communities. It is just based on love, and human goodness. It was a powerful glimpse into what it means to be whole. To me it was like rediscovering my forgotten connectedness with so many people. . . a deeply joyful and empowering experience. I rediscovered this deep wholesomeness after quite some time.

Relative 'Worlds'

Once again what I found remarkable was the amazing way in which each person constructs his own 'world' and then lives and operates in it. We met many people throughout the time we were involved in the crisis. Each person had his own pattern of desires, expectations and perceptions. Seeing these 'worlds within worlds' left me with a deep sense of relativity, of how incredibly subjective our 'reality' really is. Moreover, this pattern of perception itself is dynamic. . . changing continuously as events unfold. We found responses filtering through these patterns. . . People trying to optimize their outcomes. Maybe this too is my pattern of perceiving!

Since people perceive and communicate through their mind-patterns the importance of learning about the linkages between thought-perception, thought and communication and thought and action became apparent.

The power of Neuro Linguistic Programming (a recently

learnt communication tool) to build rapport, align outcomes, to create accord and harmony between apparently contradictory forces or the art of positive influencing was fully tested in this crisis. But it requires great awareness and understanding to be effective. Awareness of the deeper desires operating in one's own mind at a given time and how they impinge on the situation. The ultimate art is *leela* (playfulness), where there is no outcome to be sought. . . only aesthetic satisfaction. . . not even that. . .! Just playing.

A Close Look at the Government

From the point of not knowing where 'South Block' is, this drama landed me bang inside the corridors of power in New Delhi. It was a good opportunity to see how things work. We met several people in government and the response was almost always very helpful, and warm at the individual level. At the collective level, this is what I saw:

- * There were several occasions during the fortyfive days of this drama when the statements and signals of the Government (as reported in the media) were either mutually inconsistent and/or contradictory. We would get feedback from Srinagar on the damage this was doing to the process of negotiation which was on. It appeared that the Government did not have a clear policy on Kashmir or hostages. This is harmful as far as building public trust/credibility is concerned, more so in a state like J & K at present.
- * Perhaps the above process is merely a symptom of a deeper malaise and that is the inability of the Government to work as an integrated/unified team. We found different desire patterns/ego-centres pulling in different directions; ample evidence of disorder, confusion and waste. . . a waste of energy, time, efforts, public resources. It was an eye-opener.

- * From what I could see happening as a facilitator of Organisation Development, it appeared that *the Government of India is operating like a sluggish behemoth*. . . very far from the creative, quick responsive machinery that it ought to be.
- * Poor communication between Centre and the States, between various departments, ministries etc. at the Centre, between bureaucrats and politicians (with mutual mistrust), between people and politicians, people and bureaucrats has made the whole process of governing cut-off from ground realities. It has also blocked the free creative energies of people which could be harnessed to do something quickly.
- * In sharp contrast to the sluggish, unresponsive and often uncoordinated movements of the Government machine, I discovered for myself the immense potential and power of people working together.
- * People can do a lot better if only they fully appreciate the potential of:
 - Their organized information.
 - Thoughts, words and actions.
 - Their incredibly rich connectedness to other people (networking).

One thing I observed in this drama is the tremendous possibility of influencing outcomes by constantly propagating certain positive thoughts; positive words and actions (verbal and non-verbal). These move on a network and create their own ripples and effects as they move along. The same is also true for negativity (which is the absence of positivity). The tremendous passivity that has overtaken qualified professionals in different spheres is keeping away a whole talent bank from contributing to the Nation. We have to find ways to influence the process productively. . . not necessarily by getting into politics, but by **taking public spirited people together, organizing meaningful**

interventions, organizing INFORMATION.

I clearly see this as the power source of the future. Inspired action born out of clear insight, lofty but specific goals, and organized information.

On question I have asked myself is: "Why does it take a crisis like this to galvanize productive people energy?" Can there be some other process which would yank people out of their egos and the associated concerns to liberate enormous possibility? The answer appears to be setting God-sized goals and then working together to make them happen.

Life's Beautiful Learning Process

Can Life's beautiful learning process really conclude? What you have just read through is a psychological snapshot of one person's experience and how he saw it. My brother's experience of the same set of events is alongside. What my parents were going through as we struggled for their release is the major part of this book.

Windows of images and perceptions . . . tremendous relativity and yet a deeper human truth. Something that urges one to share, to show you, dear reader, how my window looks. So that one day we realize the sky onto which all windows finally open. . . the sky where you and I and the entire human family is ONE. . . a sky where freedom and love express in positive action for the well-being of all. I close with immense gratitude to Existence, to the whole. May blessings unfold on all sides as we allow His work to be done.

Chapter 16

What I Learnt from the Abduction of Our Parents?

BHARAT WAKHLU

THE abduction of our parents occurred on the evening of 4th September 1991, while the rest of the family was miles away in other parts of the country. What followed this shocking event was a series of planned and unplanned activities, interactions with a diverse cross-section of people, and a whole host of other experiences that served to edify me personally and all the other members of the family as well. In this write-up I intend to document some of the intensely edifying experiences that I passed through, with a hope that sharing the lessons I learnt might help to understand the fundamental dynamics of life itself.

A Basic Lesson Learnt

Very early in the unfolding of the abduction drama it became clear that if the positive flow of life's forces are to be made an ally, there is a need to become an utterly open channel through which such forces could pass freely. Guided by my elder brother Arun, and relying on earlier experiences, it seemed axiomatic that for such a situation to arise it was essential that one would have to operate from a condition of deep, unpretentious humility—the kind that arises from a deep and inexplicable understanding of the Wisdom of Existence itself. I was fortunate that owing to previous experiences this understanding was already there, and the added awareness of the fact that the crisis could only be solved with the active dependence on the positive forces of Life itself, served to

stimulate and guide me into an active form of humility. This, to my mind, was fundamental to the ultimate positive outcome, and hence I regard this as a very basic lesson indeed.

Essential Goodness of People

A major realisation that occurred was that people are essentially very helpful and good-natured. I was overwhelmed by the extent of help that was forthcoming from people. It also dawned upon me that to a large extent the help and assistance was forthcoming in such large measure, because I was very grateful for whatever was coming from others. This was in complete contrast to the ordinary situation where one thinks that it is one's right to receive assistance from friends, or relatives for instance. The greater was my awareness about the need to have the positive forces of Existence flow unhindered, the more was the help from people forthcoming. It was almost as if by remaining aware, and hence humbly centred in the moment at hand, the world of people outside was becoming more responsive and helpful.

Interactions with People

In the course of our interactions with hundreds of people from different walks of life, it became evident that to elicit help from people, especially those whom we were meeting for the first time, and who had till then been strangers, the creation of instant rapport was of paramount importance. The fact that our initial meetings with many people were scheduled to last no more than a few minutes, made it imperative for the rapport to be created in the shortest possible span of time.

One thing became extremely clear: people are able to read others like an open book, and if there is ever any inconsistency between what one may say, and the way one's body says the same thing, people are bound to find out even if the incongruity is subtle. Therefore, it was necessary that we be true to ourselves,

and try and communicate as openly as possible. In order to facilitate this process we also relied substantially on being totally aware of the speaker, being active listeners and generally attentive to all the elements of the interaction. By genuinely conveying to the other person our concern for his point of view, and openly sharing our points of view, a lasting form of rapport was inevitably built.

Lessons Learnt from the Government

The interactions with Government officials brought me close to the working methods of the Government, and I was able to observe and understand a great deal of how the Government of India actually functions. One of the most striking features was that in comparison with some of the other organizations that I was familiar with, the Government was a veritable giant, a leviathan of sorts which has the potential to bring about immense positive change in society. At the same time it was noticeable that this huge behemoth of an organization was more like a sluggish dinosaur than like an active humming bird, characterised by swift decisive actions and responsiveness to the outside.

The reasons for this too were evident; on the one hand the political leaders, who usually formed the Cabinet, had a set of goals and priorities that was determined more by the specific requirements of their respective constituencies, as well as by the prevailing political conditions that would affect their fortunes at the hustings whenever elections would again be called. On the other hand were the bureaucrats, who reported to the political leaders and who seemed to be committed to national development. The bureaucrats, it seemed, were so concerned about their security and their careers, which they thought were entirely 'controlled' by their political bosses, that the goal of national development always took a back seat. A problem of national importance would therefore merit the attention of the bureaucrat,

even if he personally thought of the issue as being sufficiently pressing, only when his boss would say it needs attention. But since the political leader is governed by a different set of objectives it would often seem as though the government is unconcerned about the myriad problems facing the nation.

To me this was somewhat upsetting, and I did feel let down that the most 'powerful' organization in the country is also ineffectively handling the kind of issues which it alone can resolve. I guess the point of learning from all this was that anyone in power, be it a political leader or a corporate executive, he or she has to look at his/her role as one of providing outstanding service to all those people who have expectations from them. To my mind, any organisation that seeks to develop this basic value in all its members is bound to become a responsive organisation, which is able to serve people in the most effective manner.

Learning from Life

Human beings are fortunate that Existence has provided them with a high degree of intelligence, as well as the ability to decide and choose between options. Two very fundamental choices that humans can make concerns whether they will choose to look at life as a friend or as a foe. I think this represents a very basic choice, because if one looks at life as a friend then it builds a tremendous amount of trust in whatever one may experience in life; alternatively, if a person considers all that life puts forth as the doings of a foe, then one is likely to resist all that and spend considerable energy in the process.

The interesting aspect that dawned upon me recently was that Life is Existence. So whatever life offers is an offering from Existence itself, which in its intrinsic form represents all that is benevolent, and positive and purposeful. To shut oneself out from whatever may be forthcoming from life, therefore, is akin to a

person severing himself from his own 'life-support' system! Obviously that seems quite a ridiculous thing to do, and yet that is what we all are likely to do by looking at life as a foe.

I actively sought to look at life as a friend, whose every profferment I was to accept in a state of grateful and choiceless awareness. This resulted in my 'flowing' along as things came by, and truly believing that, "what is, is; what isn't isn't, and that's fine".

Faith Reaffirmed

With a friend such as life to carry one along there can only be joyous learning at every stage. The recent crisis has provided a somewhat concentrated dose of learning, and I am grateful to Existence for it. More so, since the lessons I have learnt have only served to reaffirm my faith in the Wisdom of Life itself, and in the positive power of humble prayers that serve to dissolve one's ego to a point where one becomes but an open channel for His Grace to flow, and to operate in the most harmonious manner. Such a state of being, to my mind, is the one from which one can also serve society as best as one should.

Glossary

<i>Action</i>	Engagement in armed encounter with military or police.
<i>Allah-o-Akbar</i>	God is great!
<i>Ameer</i>	Title of various Muslim rulers and commanders.
<i>Ashtami</i>	Eighth day of the lunar fortnight.
<i>Ayat</i>	Verse from the holy Quran.
<i>Azadi</i>	Freedom; independence.
<i>Bindi</i>	Dot mark on forehead worn by women in South Asia.
<i>Brahminzada</i>	Progeny of members of Hindu "twice-born" caste.
<i>Chhakri</i>	Kashmiri folk music.
<i>Chhakun</i>	To throw away or dispense with.
<i>Channel</i>	Communication link with Headquarters.
<i>Chhatanav</i>	A tiny-canoe shaped timber boat.
<i>Chamcha</i>	Derogatory term denoting a sycophant (Lit. spoon).
<i>Dara dafa</i>	Kashmiri swear word meaning "To hell with it".
<i>Dastgir Sahib</i>	A shrine of Peer Dastgir, patron religious saint of the Kashmiris.
<i>Deedar</i>	Sight of a holy relic.
<i>Diwali</i>	Hindu autumn festival of lights.
<i>Dogla</i>	Product of ethnic admixture.
<i>Dahi</i>	Yoghurt made from milk.
<i>Darwaish</i>	A saintly person.
<i>Durga Ashtami</i>	Religious festival in honour of Goddess of Eternal Energy.
<i>Fana</i>	Merging with the infinite, in Sufi mysticism.
<i>Faqir</i>	A saintly person.

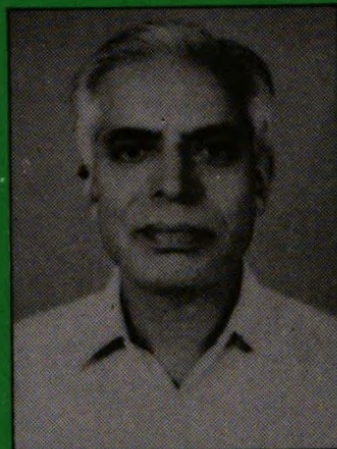
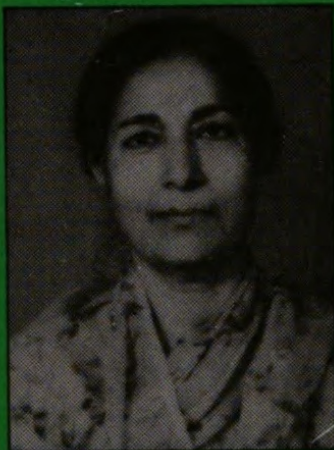
<i>Fateh</i>	Victory.
<i>Ghee</i>	Cooking fat made by heating cream of milk or butter.
<i>Ghazal</i>	A form of Urdu/Kashmiri poetry/poem.
<i>Girda</i>	Round and thin oven baked Kashmiri bread made from white wheat flour.
<i>Grahpravesh</i>	Customary house-warming for entry into a new home.
<i>Halwa</i>	Semolina pudding fried in butter.
<i>Hadeeth: Hadees</i>	Religious injunctions in Islam.
<i>Hookah</i>	Hubble-bubble for smoking tobacco.
<i>Insha Allah</i>	Arabic word meaning God willing.
<i>Jatri</i>	Pilgrim visiting a holy place.
<i>Jehad</i>	Holy war in Islam.
<i>Kachhu</i>	Large wooden barge boat.
<i>Kafir</i>	Infidel in Islam.
<i>Kalima</i>	Prime doctrine of Islam.
<i>Kameez</i>	Long shirt with loose fit.
<i>Karakul</i>	Afghan cap made from lamb fur.
<i>Khandress</i>	Male attire of Afghan style comprising loose shirt and tapering pajamas.
<i>Khoroo</i>	Bald fellow; naughty person.
<i>Kunal</i>	Spurious mujahid not baptized in Pakistan.
<i>Kutter Jamati</i>	Arch fundamentalist.
<i>Lawas</i>	Oven baked leavened bread consumed by Kashmiris with tea.
<i>Langar</i>	Large public kitchen serving meals at religious places.
<i>Madrassa</i>	School for religious teaching.
<i>Maher</i>	Alimony promised by husband in Islamic marriage.
<i>Makarana</i>	Dubious.
<i>Masnad</i>	Printed cotton spread for floor covering.
<i>Maulvi</i>	Muslim priest.
<i>Maund</i>	Unit of weight, approx. 40 kg.
<i>Masi</i>	Mother's sister (aunty).

<i>Mohalla</i>	A specified zone within a large city which comprises many such units.
<i>Mujahid</i>	A warrior participating in holy war.
<i>Musalman</i>	A believer in Islamic faith.
<i>Mukhabir</i>	Informant who divulges secrets to the enemy.
<i>Mubarak</i>	Heartily congratulations.
<i>Nallah</i>	A small rivulet, stream or ravine.
<i>Namaskar</i>	Hindu greeting with folded hands.
<i>Namaz</i>	Muslim form of prayer.
<i>Nan</i>	Kashmiri leavened baked bread.
<i>Navmi</i>	Ninth day of the Hindu lunar calendar.
<i>Navratra</i>	Nine-day festival in honour of Goddess of Eternal Energy.
<i>Nirakar</i>	Formless God.
<i>Nizam-e-Mustafa</i>	God's own world order for Muslims.
<i>Pheran</i>	Loose woollen garment worn by Kashmiris.
<i>Prasadam</i>	God's gift. Token given in temple.
<i>Phirsal</i>	Formal feast in honour of Kashmiri bridegroom soon after his marriage.
<i>Palloo</i>	The loose end of the saree worn by women.
<i>Rakh</i>	A protected swamp/grazing/forest area.
<i>Rakhshas</i>	Demons.
<i>Ram Navmi</i>	A Hindu festival.
<i>Reda</i>	A horse drawn carriage for carrying loads.
<i>Reshi</i>	A saintly person.
<i>Roti</i>	Kashmiri bread taken with tea.
<i>Rozdari</i>	Fasting during the Muslim month of "Ramadhan".
<i>Rukh</i>	One of the chessmen in the game of chess.
<i>Salam-walekum</i>	Muslim greeting.
<i>Samavar</i>	Copper/Brass vessel for making boiling hot tea.
<i>Said Sahib</i>	Famous saint whose shrine is at Durga Nag in Srinagar.
<i>Sheer chai</i>	Tea made with salt, milk and cream, with a lovely pink colour.

whic	Shitwar	Ladies' tapered pajamas for formal wear.
	Soyat	Wick; nickname given to militants who are not too important.
	Shivratri	Hindu festival symbolizing the marriage of Shiv and Shakti (Nature and Energy).
temy	Shukran Allah	God be thanked (Arabic word).
	Shashti	Sixth day of the Hindu lunar calendar.
	Saree	Loose five metre long wrapping garment of cotton/silk worn by women in South Asia.
	Tonga	Horse drawn carriage to seat four passengers.
	Teher	Yellow rice topped with boiling oil or butter.
des	Tongawalla	Coachman.
	Trami	A large copper plate for serving meals to four people who eat together.
	Urs	Annual birthday fair of a saint.
min	Wazwan	A typical Kashmiri feast with rice and numerous dishes made from mutton.
i b	Walinj	The heart.
om	Yamraj	The Hindu God of Death. His name is synonymous with deep fear.

KIDNAPPED

**45 DAYS WITH
MILITANTS IN KASHMIR**



KHEM LATA WAKHLU O N WAKHLU

In describing the ordeal of their 45-days captivity at the hands of the Kashmiri militants Dr O.N. Wakhlu and wife Khem Lata throw some light on the hopes and fears of the extremists and the frustrations and anxieties of the people caught up in a turmoil they are powerless to contain.

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